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EXCITING WESTERN

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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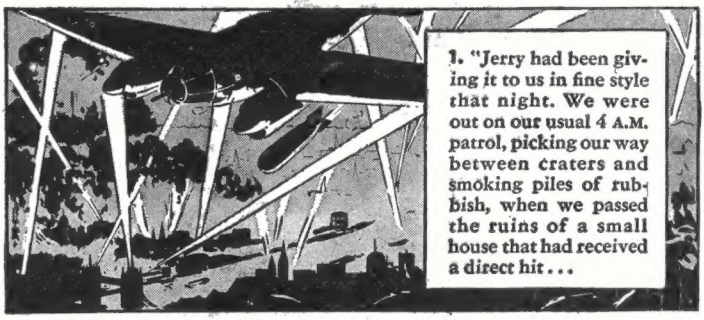
THE CIMARRON KID RIDES AGAIN
An Exciting Novelet
By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

BULLET BALANCE
A Navajo Raine Novelet
By JACKSON COLE

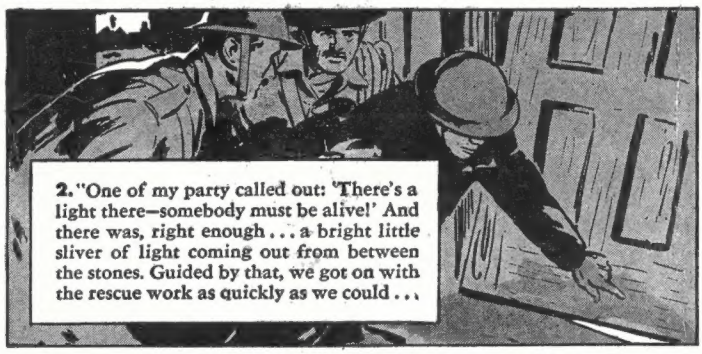
THE CHEYENNE TRAIL
A Pony Express Novelet
By REEVE WALKER

LONDON'S "MIDGET MARSHAL" TELLS BOMBING THRILLER!

This true story of the blitz was told to a war correspondent by Michael Davies, Chief Shelter Marshal, London Area. Mr. Davies is famous as the smallest Air Marshal in England; his height is 3 ft. 6 in. Mr. Davies was a practicing optometrist before the war, was active in organizing youth camps, is now in charge of one of the largest air shelters in England. The shelter extends 4 acres and includes 4 miles of underground corridors. Complete with interior radio communications and sixty-five large sleeping bays, it can normally house 10,000 people—in a pinch, 14,000. Over one and a half million bricks were used to build the blast wall.



1. "Jerry had been giving it to us in fine style that night. We were out on our usual 4 A.M. patrol, picking our way between craters and smoking piles of rubbish, when we passed the ruins of a small house that had received a direct hit . . .



2. "One of my party called out: 'There's a light there—somebody must be alive!' And there was, right enough . . . a bright little sliver of light coming out from between the stones. Guided by that, we got on with the rescue work as quickly as we could . . .

3. ". . . and found our man, half dead from injuries and bomb shock, his hand still gripping his flashlight like a vise. Seems he'd grabbed his flashlight to show others to the basement when the bomb fell. And that—plus having fresh batteries—was what saved his own life!"

PLEASE NOTE: Don't blame your dealer if he's out of "Eveready" flashlight batteries. The Armed Forces are taking enormous quantities, and the war industries with the highest priority ratings are taking the rest.

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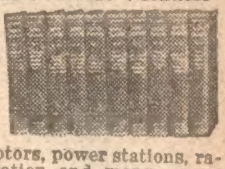

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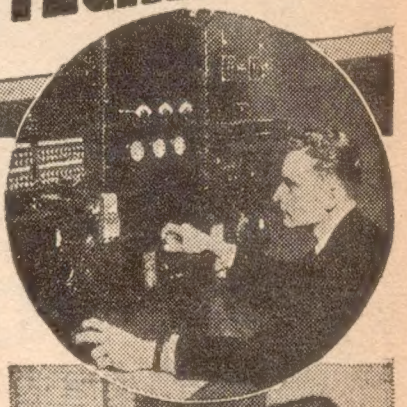
to PROVE I can Train You at Home in Spare Time to BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN



BROADCASTING STATIONS (top illustration) employ Radio Technicians as operators, installation, maintenance men and in other fascinating, steady, well-paying technical jobs. FIXING RADIO SETS (bottom illustration), a booming field today, PAYS many Radio Technicians $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week extra fixing Radios in spare time.

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$200 a Month in Own Business

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Broadcasting Stations, Aviation and Police Radio, Ship Radio and other communications branches are scrambling for Operators and Technicians to replace men who are leaving. You may never see a time again when it will be so easy to get started in this fascinating field. The Government too needs hundreds of competent civilian and enlisted Radio men and women. Radio factories, now working on government orders for radio equipment, employ trained men. And think of the NEW jobs Television, Frequency Modulation, Electronics and other Radio developments will open after the war! This is the sort of opportunity you shouldn't pass up.

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There's probably an opportunity right in your neighborhood to make money in spare time fixing Radios. I'll give you the training that has started hundreds of N.R.I. students making $5, $10 a week extra within a few months after enrolling. The N.R.I. Course isn't something just prepared to take advantage of the present market for technical books and courses. It has been tried, tested, developed, perfected during the 28 years we have been teaching Radio.

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MAIL COUPON NOW for FREE Sample Lesson and 64-page illustrated book. You'll see the many fascinating jobs Radio offers and how YOU can train at home. If you want to jump your pay—mail Coupon at once in an envelope or paste on a penny postal—J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3K09, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

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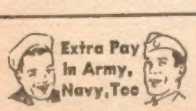

Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps Service men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, MUCH HIGHER PAY. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Over 1,700 Service men now enrolled.

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YOU'VE often been asked that question: "Do you play?" Everybody looks at you expectantly, waiting for you to sit down at the piano and entertain the crowd. Are you compelled to embarrass yourself and throw cold water on the party by saying "No"?

What a difference it would make if you could say "Yes". Think of the good times and popularity in store if you could only play the piano or some other musical instrument—the guitar, violin, accordion, saxophone or whichever one happens to be your favorite.

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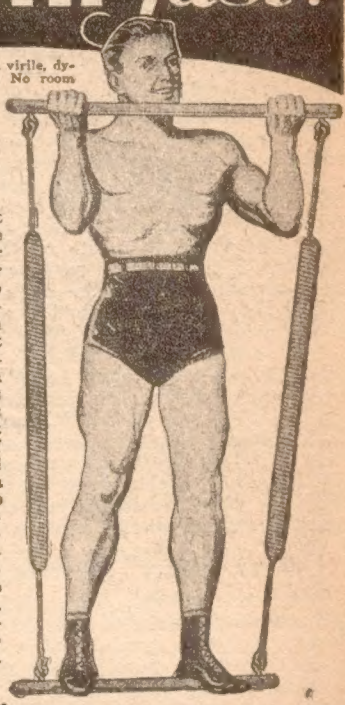

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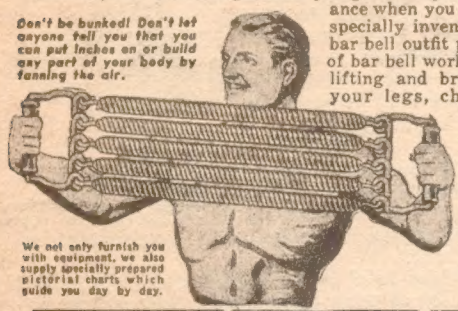

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A Department for Readers Conducted by

CAPTAIN RANGER

HOMBRES and hombresses, the old homespun skills of the early pioneers are comin' back into favor mighty fast durin' these days of wartime emergency.

Kind of paradoxical that this most modern an' mechanized of all wars should throw a heap of civilians plumb back to the outdoor lore, and woodsmen arts of their ancestors. But that's how it is in many cases. Perhaps it is on account of folks can't get a pile of things they bin accustomed to as easy as they bin accustomed to gettin' 'em.

Take a little item like fishin'. A lot of fishin' enthusiasts are goin' fishin' for *food* this year when mostly they just went fishin' for fun durin' recent years. 'Course our pioneer forefathers, and our foremothers too I reckon, they fished for keeps right along. Their main objective was to get a meal for themselves and the kids. Any excess fish was carefully salted down in tubs or smoked and stowed away.

What "Sport" Hunters Can Do!

Same with huntin'. This fall hunters in the deer season are goin' to be lookin' out for venison haunches as much as for a fine spread of antlers that will merely make another trophy to hang on the lodge walls, or decorate the empty spot over the open fireplace.

Just to give you an idee how much "sport" hunters can add to the country's vital meat supply let's take the figures from a single popular eastern deer huntin' State last year.

In Maine last deer season hunters bagged 22,301 deer, setting' an all time record for the State, and game authorities out there pointed out that this meant a yield of some 2,500,000 pounds of dressed venison with a cash value of around $1,000,000. That's a lot of good meat to add to the tables of the families in a single State.

Good Eatin'

We bin pow-wowin' with a high-up conservation official of another State further West a short while ago and this fellow says they're sure stressin' the food value of game animals in his bailiwick right now.

He's bin pointin' out that among the little varmints 'coon and 'possum are good eatin', and even the lowly woodchuck ain't a bad dish providin' you first cut them little scent kernels out from under the forelegs and parboil the critter to remove most of the strong taste.

After that you just take Mr. Woodchuck, season him pretty heavy with pepper and sage, pop him into a pan and bake him to a rich, juicy brown.

Far as deer are concerned this conservation official fellow is campaignin' against wastin' a pound of venison this comin' season.

He's got himself a slogan all thunk up too. "Freeze it, can it, smoke it, jerk it," he says. "Use it all, even the hide."

That's good advice but it's goin' to send a lot of fellows, even fellows who fancy themselves pretty good hunters, lookin' up a real oldtimer somewhere and askin' how.

Makin' Jerky

Take the business of makin' jerky. There's an oldtime, almost forgotten pioneer skill that produced a game meat product that pound for pound contained twice the nourishment of fresh meat.

Besides bein' compact and easily kept jerky had a lot of other advantages. Ground up and the powder added to soup, it gave the latter flavor and the kind of nourishment that would take right aholt of a hungry man and make him feel like fightin' a passel of wildcats.

It could be cut into chunks for stew meat. You could fry it an', doggone it, in a pinch you could grab yourself a hunk and eat it raw, providin' you had good chewin' teeth. Raw jerky wouldn't never take no prizes for tenderness, but it could sure put stayin' power in a man's blood.

Originally jerky, the Mexicans call it *charqui*, meant strips of meat cut thin and dried without the use of salt. Rightly prepared jerky meat ain't goin' to spoil on you for months and months. And it ain't goin' to freeze on you neither, which made it handy for the pioneers in the far north.

The secret of its nourishment lies in the fact that because of the manner in which it is prepared jerky or jerked meats contain the full proportion of mineral salts, fats, and pro-

(Continued on page 12)

New! COYNE "Learn-by-Doing" Shop Course

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THIS YEAR Americans are going to make—minus taxes—125 billion dollars.

But this year, due to the war, we are going to have only 80 billion dollars' worth of goods to spend this on.

That leaves 45 billion dollars' worth of money burning in our jeans.

If each of us should take his share of this 45 billion dollars (which averages approximately

$330 per person) and hustle out to buy all he could with it—what would happen is what happens at an auction where every farmer there wants a horse that's up for sale.

We would bid the prices of things up and up and up. Instead of paying $30 for a suit we're going to pay $45. Instead of $5 for a pair of shoes we're going to pay $8.

This bidding for scarce goods is going to raise prices faster than wages. Wages just won't keep up.

So what will people do?

U. S. workers will ask for more money. Since labor is scarce, a lot of them will get it. Then farmers and business men who feel the pinch are going to ask more money for their goods.

And prices will go *still higher.* And the majority of us will be in that same old spot again—only worse.

This is what is known as Inflation.

Our government is doing a lot of things to keep prices down . . . rationing the scarcest goods, putting ceiling prices on things, stabilizing wages, increasing taxes. But the government can't do the *whole job.* So let's see what *we* can do about it.

If, instead of running out with our extra dough, and trying to bid on everything in sight, we buy only what we absolutely need, we will come out all right.

If, for instance, we put this money into (1) Taxes; (2) War Bonds; (3) Paying off old debts;

(4) Life Insurance; and (5) The Bank, we don't bid up the prices of goods at all. And if besides doing this we (6) refuse to pay more than ceiling prices; and (7) ask no more for what we have to sell—no more in wages, no more for goods—*prices stay where they are now.*

And we pile up a bank account. We have our family protected in case we die. We have War Bonds that'll make the down payment on a new house after the war, or help us retire some day. And we don't have taxes after the war that practically strangle us to death.

Maybe, doing this sounds as if

it isn't fun. But being shot at up at the front isn't fun, either. You have a duty to those soldiers as well as to yourself. You *can't* let the money that's burning a hole in your pocket start setting the country on fire.

★ ★ ★

This advertisement, prepared by the War Advertising Council, is contributed by this magazine in co-operation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

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Wear it out
Make it do
Or do without

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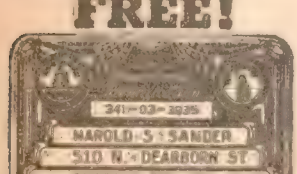

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Also FREE—If you order at once we send you this beautiful Identification Key Tab and Gilt Chain to match, hand engraved with your name, address, city and state. Will last a lifetime.

Men:—Here, without a doubt, is positively the greatest Billfold and Pass Case Bargain that you'll be likely to see for a good many years to come. For a high quality Leather Billfold, beautifully engraved in gold, with your LODGE Emblem or Army or Navy Insignia and Name, you would expect to pay up to $4.50 and consider it a marvelous buy. If you take advantage of this sensational introductory offer, you can get this superb genuine Leather Wallet and Pass Case for only $1.98, and we will send you absolutely free a specially designed three color lifetime Identification Plate, which carries your Social Security Number, your Name and Address or your Army Draft Number. This fine grain Leather Billfold must actually be seen to be fully appreciated. Besides the spacious compartment at the back which can be used for currency, checks, papers, etc., it has four pockets each protected by celluloid to prevent the soiling of your valuable membership and credit cards.

When closed, this handsome Billfold has the soft velvety feel you find only in select quality Leather. Your choice of Emblems and Initials are beautifully embossed in 23 karat gold on the face of the Billfold. Due to difficulty in obtaining choice leather because of war conditions, the supply of these Billfolds is limited. Remember if you send your order promptly, we will include absolutely FREE, a beautiful Identification Key Tag and Gilt Chain to match, all hand engraved with your Name, Address, City and State. If after receiving your Billfold and Free Gift, you don't positively agree that this is the most outstanding bargain you have ever come across, return them to us and your money will be cheerfully refunded in full. Send your order today, without fail, as you won't be disappointed.

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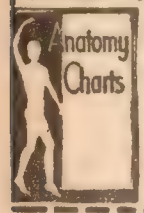

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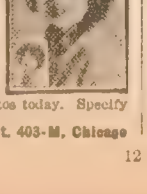

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 8)

teins as they were in the meat originally. Only the water component is removed in the jerking process.

Pioneers Used Buffalo Meat

Strips of beef can be jerked, but so can other meats. Fact is the early mountain men and the pioneers in the West usually made their jerky out of buffalo meat, on account of because buffalos was a lot handier to get in those days than a cow. Deer, moose and caribou likewise lend themselves to makin' good jerky.

Northern pioneers, trappers and prospectors sorta favored caribou. Elk meat for some reason don't seem to keep so good as the others when dried into jerky. Goat meat makes good jerky. Mexicans use goat jerky quite considerable.

Like we said in the beginnin' jerky meant meat dried in the sun without salt. This was and is okay in the dry air of the semi-desert sections of the Southwest where this type of curing is specially favored.

Unsalted meat left hangin' in strips don't spoil in that sort of climate. It don't collect blowflies neither. It just dries to a hard, brittle, waterless and kinda leathery strip of whatever it was to begin with, buffalo, beef, deer, or goat.

Build a Dryin' Rack

The right way to make jerky under them circumstances is to start in by building a rectangular dryin' rack made by drivin' four strong forked stakes into the ground at the corners of your rectangle.

Have 'em long enough so they'll extend about four feet above the ground when driven in. Next you kin lay two long poles in the forks to form the long sides of the rectangle. A good size to make the dryin' rack is six foot long by three foot wide. An' here's a tip, have the side poles cut plenty long enough to extend over the forks in the corner posts so's when you weight 'em with meat they won't sag and slip outta the forks.

Now you're goin' to need a bunch of cross sticks about an inch in diameter and long enough to stretch across from pole to pole.

These are the dryin' racks on which the meat is hung, so you want to have 'em free from bark. You kin sharpen one end to a point and skewer the strips of meat on them for dryin', or drape the long strips over the sticks and hang 'em up that way. In any event don't load the sticks too full, and don't have any strip of meat touchin' another when it is hangin' on the rack.

Your deer meat or whatever ought to be cut in strips as long as convenient, and as thin as possible, not over a half inch thick at most. That last bein' one of the secrets of good jerky.

The Sun Does the Rest

In the dry air of the arid Southwest once you got the meat racked up, the blazin' sun will do the rest, suckin' up every drop of water in the meat and leavin' the dried jerky.

How are you goin' to tell when the job is

finished? You can count your meat made into jerky when it is dry, hard and *brittle*. It'll snap then instead of bendin'. How long this will take depends on the climate, the sun's heat, and the meat itself. Practise and experience are about the best teachers in tellin' when jerky is done.

As for you fellows interested in preservin' all the meat outta that deer you're goin' to bag this fall, but ain't in a dry climate, don't get uneasy. We're comin' to you right now. We just gave the oldtime western real "jerky" recipe first.

The Shallow Pit Method

If sun dryin' alone ain't goin' to be enough, or if moisture in the air is apt to spoil the meat, dig a shallow pit under the dryin' rack and build a low fire under the strips. Not enough fire to cook the meat, or extract any of the juices but one that'll give out enough heat to help the sun in the dryin' process. Such a fire will likewise keep blowflies and other insects away from the meat while it is dryin'.

That's two ways of makin' bona fide jerky. Nowadays however lots of hunters and outdoorsmen salt the meat strips before dryin' them over a fire, usin' a fire with a thin smoke to add a woodsy flavor to the finished product. In most parts of the country saltin' down the meat first is safer. It prevents spoilage.

You've got a choice of two ways of doin' this. After the meat is cut in strips you can soak the strips for twenty-four hours in a strong brine solution.

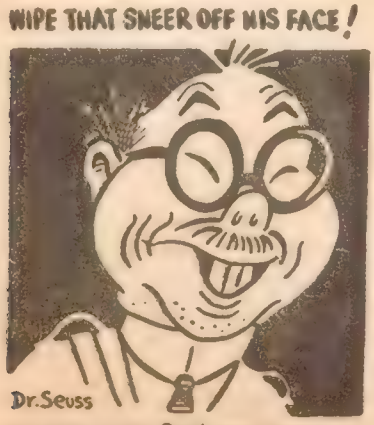
If you don't want to do that you can rub the strips in salt, or mix 'em with salt usin' about a quart of salt for an average deer. A handy way to do this in camp is to mix the meat strips and the salt inside the hide of the deer, then cover the meat with the hide for a few hours to let the salt soak in.

Will Keep Indefinitely

After the salt has soaked in take the strips and dry 'em (but don't cook 'em) over a slow, low fire that gives some wood smoke (but not too much) for a whole day, meanin' twenty-four hours.

The result is a dried, cured meat that will

(Continued on page 94)



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The Magic of Mind

WERE the great personages of the past victims of a stupendous hoax? Could such eminent men of the ancient world as Socrates, Pericles, and Alexander the Great have been deluded and cast under the spell of witchcraft—or did the oracles whom they consulted actually possess *a mysterious faculty of foresight?* That *the human mind can truly exert an influence over things and conditions* was not a credulous belief of the ancients, but a known and demonstrable fact to them. That there exists a wealth of infinite knowledge just beyond the border of our daily thoughts, which can be aroused and commanded at will, was not a fantasy of these sages of antiquity, but a dependable aid to which they turned in time of need.

It is time you realized that the rites, rituals and practices of the ancients were not superstitions, but subterfuges to conceal the marvelous workings of natural law from those who would have misused them. Telepathy, projection of thought, the materializing of ideas into helpful realities, are no longer thought by intelligent persons to be impossible practices, but instead, *demonstrable sciences,* by which a greater life of happiness may be had.

One of America's foremost psychologists and university instructors, says of his experiments with thought transference and the powers of mind—"The successes were much too numerous to be merely lucky hits and one can see no way for guessing to have accounted for the results." *Have you* that open-minded attitude of today which warrants a clear, positive revelation of the facts of mind which intolerance and bigotry have suppressed for years? *Advance with the times;* learn the truth about your inherited powers.

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Maddened, Wes fought to get hold of the knife

THE CIMARRON KID RIDES AGAIN

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

Wes Stone Battles Against His Old Pards of the Outlaw Trail in a Desperate Struggle for Vengeance and Vindication!

CHAPTER I

Bushwhacked

WES STONE shoved back his chair from the table in the Bar 6 cook-house and stood up.

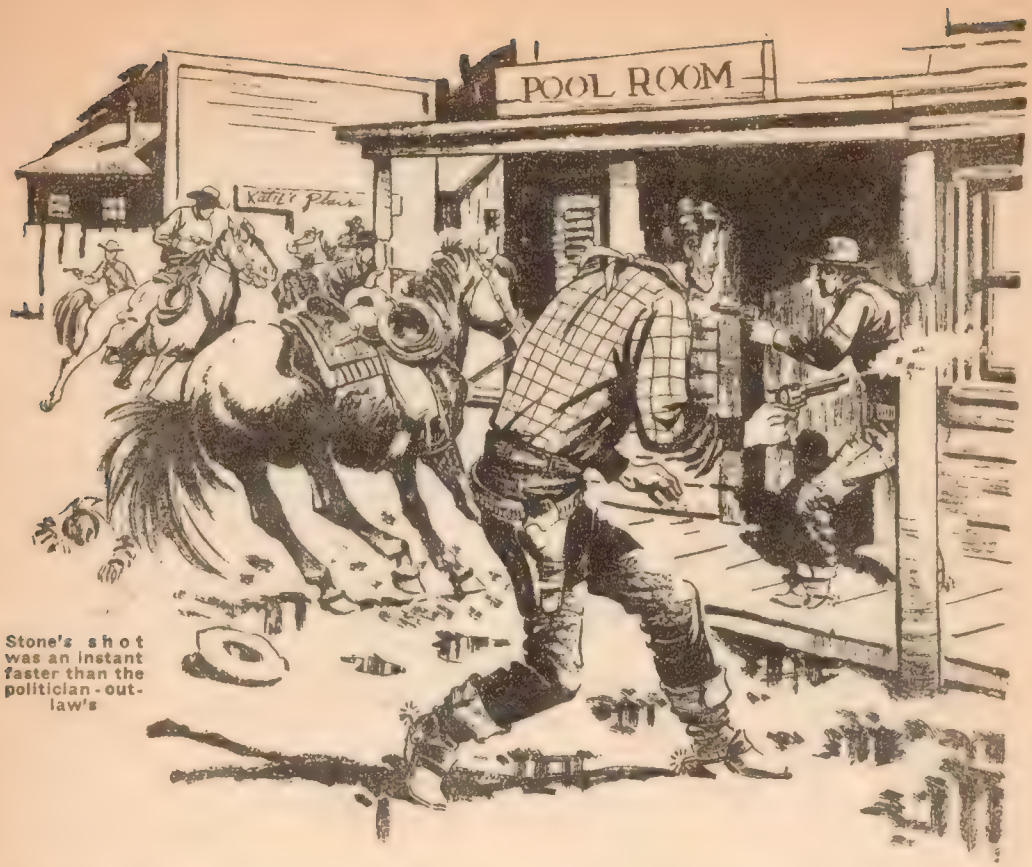
"Let's be rackin', Carl," he said to the blond youth beside him.

A sneering laugh broke from "Bull" Dawson, a tawny-haired giant.

"Milo," he asked the foreman, "why don't yuh send a *man* with Carl to find them cows?"

It was a deliberate insult, as every man there knew. They knew, also, that Wes Stone would take it. It had been this way, ever since Bull Dawson had come

AN EXCITING COMPLETE ACTION NOVELET



Stone's shot was an instant faster than the politician-outlaw's

with the Bar 6. He lost no opportunity to taunt and bully Stone, goading him to fight. But Stone would not fight. The cowboys could not understand it. For Wes Stone had all the markings of a fighting man—the still eyes, the compact build, the quick coordination of mind and muscle.

"Suppose yuh let me handle my end of it, Bull?" Milo Hewitt said.

"Shore. I just hate to think of Wes gettin' hurt, that's all."

Stone went out, his face pale and drawn, his jaw muscles like knobs. The gun in the worn old holster at his hip appeared almost a part of him. The Bar 6 boys had seen him draw that gun with incredible speed. But this had been in practice.

Carl Brandt, only son of old Nelse, who owned the Bar 6, leaned across the table toward Dawson.

"Yuh're goin' to pick on him one time too many," he prophesied.

The big cowboy's hand trembled so violently that he spilled his coffee.

"Don't scare me like that," he quavered. "Gosh, I'm so s-cared!" Then he laughed. No one else laughed.

"Yuh'll laugh on the other side of yore ugly face one of these days," Carl said, and got up.

He went to the corral, where Stone was roping out a horse.

"Wes," he asked, "how much longer yuh goin' to stand for his ribbin'?"

No answer came.

"I know yuh ain't scared of him."

Stone looked steadily at the young fellow. "No," he said.

"Then, why—" Carl turned away with a strained laugh. "Oh, well. It's yore business, not mine. But yuh got to do it, sooner or later."

Carl's sister, Helga, came to say goodby. She was taller than the boy, of the same willowy slenderness. The newly risen sun shone in her corn-yellow hair that was combed smoothly from her broad forehead and knotted at the back of her neck. Her clear blue eyes were troubled.

"Dad's counting on you finding out something," she told them. "But don't do anything rash, Carl. You'll look after him, won't you, Wes?"

"And put me to bed every night." Carl laughed. He climbed into the saddle, and the horse bucked a few times before lining out. "So long, Sis! See yuh in church!"

HELGA'S gaze rested f o n d l y and thoughtfully on him. She looked up at Stone, a sweet s h y n e s s in her smile.

"I'll be thinking about you," she said softly.

Actual pain showed in Wes Stone's eyes, but his mouth shaped a smile.

"I guess I don't need to tell yuh who I'll be thinkin' about," he said, as though the words were forced from him.

A pause fell between them.

"I'm a little w o r r i e d," Helga said. "Everybody in the valley losing cattle, and nobody knows who is s t e a l i n g them."

"That's what we are goin' to find out," Stone said, and started his horse in motion. "So long, Helga. I'll take good care of Carl."

"So long, Wes."

She could not see the bitter regret, the unfathomable anguish that wrenched his face. Nor hear the moan that came from behind his clenched teeth.

In vast brown s w e l l s the country rolled away from the road. The sage had lost its leaves, and the only green was that of the yuccas. Cottonwoods lifted naked arms from the draws. To the north, the direction in which the riders were going, the Gunbarrel Mountains were a faint blue silhouette against the darker sky. A thin, cutting wind blew off the mountains. It rattled the yucca pods, sighing through the brown grass. Sioux had given this land the name of Burnt Valley. So it was now, burned out and dead.

They r e a c h e d Red Blanket Creek shortly after noon. There, a man sat his horse at the ford, as if waiting. A small man, with long, white fingers and greenish eyes that were never still. Dye-black hair e d g e d his flat-crowned hat. A mustache, like a black cord, dropped over the corners of lips that were thin and hard.

"Mornin'," the s t r a n g e r said pleasantly. "Bar Six, I see. I'm Cash Gaines.

Sort of a neighbor. Bought out the Y Cross." His restless gaze was fixed on Stone. "Figgered you boys was out for the same thing I am. They're stealin' me plumb down to the blanket."

"We aim to find out who's doin' it," Carl said.

Gaines nodded. "Yuh're Wes Stone, ain't yuh?" he said to Stone.

The cowboy's face went granite-hard, and his eyes held a dangerous light.

"That's my name," he said, as if it were a challenge. He splashed across the ford, calling s h a r p l y to Carl to follow.

"How come he was waitin' there?" Carl wondered.

"To see me, mebbe," Stone said.

Carl grinned. "Yuh didn't give him much of a look-see. Didn't take to him, did yuh? I didn't myself."

Stone looked at him levelly. "Don't trust any man, kid, until yuh've rode the river with him. . . ."

Wes Stone and Carl had been gone five days when, back at the ranch Old Man Brandt slowly shook his head.

"I don't see no way out, Helga," he said to the yellow-haired girl seated before the fire in the living room. "No matter which way I look, I don't see no way out."

Helga did not lift her gaze from the fire. "Don't take it so hard, Dad," she said quietly. "Maybe Wes and Carl have found out something. See them coming yet?"

Nelse Brandt s h o o k his head. He turned despondently from the window, heaviness in the movement. His look at the girl was thoughtful.

"Geroe comin' to see yuh again?"

She nodded.

"See here, Helga. Jack Geroe's the biggest man in Burnt Valley, and he's rich. But don't get no notion about marryin' him, thinkin' he'll pull me out. I'd rather be sold out, a thousand times, than have yuh do that."

Helga spoke with directness born of comradeship with her father.

"Jack has asked me. I told him no." A wistful smile touched her lips, and she got up, tall in b o o t s and riding breeches. "Things are going to come out all right. Something tells me Wes and Carl have already tracked down those thieves. But I wish they'd come home."

SHE crossed to the window, looking toward the faint gray of the Gunbarrels. Brandt sank into his chair.

"It ain't only me," he m u m b l e d. "They're robbin' the valley. Hat Kelly told me he lost seventy-five steers one night last week. Oh, well." He bent forward, grizzled cheeks p r e s s e d between his palms.

Helga's gaze followed the road across the b r o w n s w e e p of grassland. It seemed so long since the boys had ridden up that road. Suddenly she pressed closer to the glass.

"Here they come!" she cried excitedly.

Nelse Brandt joined her at the window. As the horses became more distinct, Helga saw that one was led. Her father's lips made a dry s o u n d. He leaned close to the pane.

"Yuh can't see which one—is ridin'?"

She didn't a n s w e r. Her straining vision made out a long shape across the saddle of the led horse. A cord seemed to encircle her throat.

"Which one—which one?" Brandt muttered, hands c u p p e d to his eyes. "Can't yuh see?"

"I don't know," she whispered. "I can't—"

Helga ran from the h o u s e. She mounted her waiting horse and raced into the road. Which one? The question ripped like a tornado through her brain. Her b r o t h e r, or the man she loved?

The road shot past as though jerked from under her horse's feet. Other horses were pounding behind her. She swept up a long slope, knowing that on the other side she would learn the truth. With a prayer on her lips, a question in her heart that was never meant to be answered, she topped the ridge. She stared with t e r r i b l e intensity at the rider. A choking cry broke from her.

"Carl!"

Wes Stone told his story simply. Carl and he had t r a i l e d the stolen cattle through the Gunbarrels, into the basaltic badlands known as the Ink Rocks. Carl had been shot from his horse by someone hidden in the rocks—no doubt as a warning to others following this trail. The drygulcher had got away. Stone had swapped shots with him, but had lost the trail in the darkness.

His steady gray eyes, red-veined and red-rimmed from lack of sleep, moved

around the half-circle of sober-faced Bar 6 riders. They l i n g e r e d on the stricken features of Nelse Brandt, came to rest on Helga.

"I wish it had been me," he said.

Milo Hewitt broke the heavy stillness. "Did yuh see his hoss?"

"Claybank. I couldn't make out the brand."

"Yuh wouldn't be e x p e c t e d to," sneered Bull Dawson.

"Cut that," the foreman said sharply. "This is no time for that kind of talk."

Dawson turned his horse, his pale eyes fixed on Stone in derision. He rode back down the road, an arrogant set to his massive s h o u l d e r s. The other punchers looked u n e a s i l y from the blanket-wrapped figure to old Nelse Brandt.

At a curt order from Hewitt, they rode after Bull Dawson. Brandt and Milo went on with the death-laden horse. Old Nelse was as a man in a dream.

Stone and Helga followed.

"I wish it had been me," he repeated.

"That isn't for us to say, Wes," she said.

"But it's for me to settle." His voice was hard, brittle. "I'll get to the bottom of this thing if—" He stopped, his gaunt face incredibly bitter. "I'll do it no matter what happens."

"Who is at the bottom of it?" she said absently.

"I'm goin' to find out." He told of the meeting with "Cash" Gaines. "I ain't accusin' him. But I got reasons for believin' he's mixed up in it."

Helga l o o k e d at him. "I've never heard anything against Cash Gaines. Come to think of it, though, the rustling did start soon after he moved here. But that can't help poor Carl."

They rode in silence. A chill wind, edged with snow, swept down from the Gunbarrels. It whistled shrilly through the dead grass. Cattle stood in draws, tail to wind, cropping the scant browse. Leaden clouds l a y e r e d the sky, and there was no sun.

"That's Geroe," Stone said. He was looking at a rider on a big white horse charging up the road.

"I was expecting him," s a i d Helga quietly.

Stone's eyes went bleak. He seemed to see this girl as from a great distance, forever beyond his reach.

JACK GEROE reined down the beautiful Arabian beside the two men ahead. After a few moments, he came on. He was a large man, faultlessly dressed, sitting the leather as a king on his throne. Geroe was the political boss of Butte City and the county of which it was the seat. He had served in the state legislature. It was common talk that every office holder in Butte County, with one exception, took orders from him. The exception was Sheriff "Choctaw" Smith.

"I'm sorry, Helga," Geroe said when he rode up, and his tones were full and deep, pulsing with sincerity. He reached out and pressed her hand, a gesture that chilled Wes Stone strangely. "I'll do all I can to help."

"Thank you, Jack," she murmured, riding on between them.

Geroe looked at Stone, as though he would project his keen gaze into the cowboy's brain.

"And you didn't see who did it?"

"No."

The politician nodded. "It's tough. But nobody's blaming you. You did all any man could, I'm sure." He turned to Helga, saying earnestly, "I'm going to clean this thing up."

"That's my job, Geroe," said Stone.

The men's gazes held levelly.

"Maybe we can work together."

"It's my job," Stone repeated and rode toward the corral.

Somehow, he did not trust Geroe. But he was fair enough to admit that Geroe probably had more right to ride with Helga Brandt than he had.

CHAPTER II

What Price Honor?

THAT n i g h t in the bunkhouse occurred one of the incidents that had been so frequent s i n c e W e s Stone and Bull Dawson had come to the Bar 6. The punchers were sitting around the stove, not saying m u c h. Dawson got up, as though to go to the water bucket. Passing Stone, he shot out his foot, kicking the box from under him. Daw-

son howled with laughter as Stone sprawled backward on the floor.

The cowboys cursed. They knew Stone would not fight. He was on his feet in a second, fists clenched, his face gray and drawn.

"Go on—hit me," Dawson taunted.

With a sound like a sob, Stone suddenly went loose all over. He rushed out of the bunkhouse.

"Blast yuh, Dawson," Milo Hewitt said thickly. "If yuh're honin' for a fight, pick on somebody that ain't yeller."

"Oh, all right. Don't go pawin' dirt. It's all in fun."

"May be fun to you," the foreman snapped. "I've had enough of it. Next time, I'll fire the two of yuh."

Bull Dawson grinned. "Then I better go out and kiss him and make up." He swaggered through the door.

Stone heard the heavy steps on the frosty grass. His breathing lifted and lowered his chest rapidly. Dawson stopped beside him.

"When yuh goin' to quit bein' a plumb fool?" he said harshly. "You and yore word! Scared to break yore parole. Yuh're goin' to break it! I'll keep doggin' yuh till I make yuh fight. Then I'll report yuh to Choctaw Smith."

Stone's outraged manhood screamed at him. But he seemed to see himself standing before Sheriff Choctaw Smith, his hand on the Bible, solemnly swearing that he would lift that hand against no man.

"If yuh was anything but a yeller dog," he said tonelessly to Bull Dawson, "yuh'd know what it is to respect a man's word."

"Huh! I'm takin' orders from Cash Gaines. Them orders is to bring yuh to yore senses. My gosh! Why don't yuh wake up? The Cimarron Kid—the best safe-opener in the country workin' for swamper's wages when Cash will pay yuh a cool thousand for that one job!"

"And you told him about me."

"Shore. Ain't we old pen pals? If yuh had any sense, yuh'd thank me for tryin' to help yuh."

Stone forced calmness into his voice. "Is Gaines at the bottom of this rustlin'?"

"I wouldn't know about that. Cash used to be a gamblin' man, before he took up ranchin'. This here safe robbery is somethin' extry."

"Yuh lie, Dawson. And you know he murdered Carl, or had it done."

Bull Dawson shook his shaggy head. "I wouldn't know about that." He grinned mirthlessly. "The only thing I'm shore about is I'm goin' to make yuh bust yore parole. I know how yuh feel about goin' back there. Cash will save yuh the trouble. Think it over, Cimarron Kid." He wheeled his bulky shape away.

Wes Stone's muscles strained after him, tugging at the very roots of his soul. A man could stand just so much. After that, he was no longer a man.

The Cimarron Kid. It was as though a band of wild horses tore through his brain. Memories of the old life crowded in on him. The wild, free days, when the Cimarron Kid was a name whispered with awe and admiration. The hot thrill of the escape, with the bank's money sacked to his cantle and the posse thundering behind . . . the sting of wind in his face . . . the hide-out, where a man's life was his own.

And now—

"It ain't worth it," he said aloud. "Cuss a man's word, when he's got to be a dog to keep it."

But the Cimarron Kid, he remembered ironically, had never broken his word. Could Wes Stone do less?

A lifetime seemed to pass over him in that moment. His agony-filled eyes focused on the ranchhouse, plain in the moonlight. He could see Helga, sitting on the porch and Jack Geroe was beside her, comforting her with soft words. The body of Carl lay inside on his bed. And Sheriff Smith—what was he doing to break the hold of the lawless in Burnt Valley?

STONE came out of his awful struggle pale and tense, a cold smile on his lips. It was his work to avenge Carl's murder, to free Nelse Brandt from the yoke of despair. His duty—against his word. He turned and called loudly:

"Dawson!"

Bull Dawson hastened back. He grinned confidently.

"Come to yore senses, huh?"

Stone's right arm straightened out against Dawson's astonished face, into the blow going all his pent-up hate for

this bully. Dawson staggered back, his features dark and taut.

"Why, yuh—"

He swung a fist at Stone's head, but missed, the momentum whirling him half around. Stone beat a hail of rights and lefts against the wide body. Knocked back six feet, he dived in twistedly, his knuckles drawing blood. Dawson was laughing at him. He hammered a fist into Stone's forehead, slamming him to earth.

"Get up and fight!" Dawson taunted, a thickness in his voice. He drew a sleeve across his bleeding mouth.

Wes Stone was on his feet. Knuckles beat solidly on flesh and bone. Toe to toe they stood, taking what each had to give. Bull Dawson outweighed Stone by fifty pounds, and his reach was six inches longer. But Stone was quicker, no fat impeding the lightning play of his muscles.

This fight was utterly brutal. Stone's right eye was entirely closed, he spat blood that poured from his crushed nose. Dawson panted through a gap in his teeth. Their shirts were ripped from their heaving chests. Their breathing made horrible gasping sounds.

Out flashed the hate-driven fists, back and forth. For the third time in as many minutes Stone was knocked down. He got up dazed, his knees wobbly. But the cold smile was still there.

"Yuh ain't licked, Wes. Go after him!"

Stone glanced behind him. There stood Milo Hewitt and the punchers. He saw them dimly. New strength seemed to flow into his straining muscles. He dived into the middle of Dawson's flailing fists, beat the big man savagely back. He glimpsed Dawson's face. Fear was in it now. Stone laughed wildly as he lashed out.

Bull Dawson rushed him, cursing hoarsely. Stone felt the crush of the big arms as he went down. Fingers clutched his throat. He saw black, his breathing stopped. With a supreme effort he tore loose those fingers. He twisted from under the smother weight—and felt steel entering his side.

Maddened, he fought to get hold of the knife. He wrenched it out of Dawson's hand, plunged the blade, with all his strength, into Dawson, wherever it would land. Stiffness ran out of Bull Dawson, and he lay still.

"Yuh murdered me!" he muttered.

Stone got shakily to his feet, unaware that he still gripped the knife.

"Give me that knife," Milo Hewitt said.

The cowboys looked at the knife.

"It's Bull's," one of them said.

Hewitt stood over Dawson, cursing him.

"Here comes somebody," a puncher said.

Stone looked. It was Jack Geroe and Sheriff Choctaw Smith. The sheriff was a small man. He walked fast to keep abreast of Geroe.

"Get up from there," Hewitt repeated angrily to Dawson.

Dawson sat up, with a shrill whistle of breath. Blood from his injured shoulder dyed the whole front of him. Two of his front teeth were out.

Jack Geroe stormed up.

"Who's this fighting—with a man laying dead in the house?"

"I'll answer for it," the foreman said quietly, "to the right man."

Geroe brushed past him. He leveled

[*Turn page*]

a glance at Stone. In it was such malignancy as Stone had never seen in a man's eyes. It puzzled him.

"So it's you," said Geroe.

Wes Stone went to meet the Law. A tremendous weight had lifted from him. The pattern of his life was now clearly before him—the old, old pattern.

"All right, Choctaw," he said.

"Too bad, Wes."

The sheriff passed him. He joined the men standing about Bull Dawson. Stone heard his brief questions.

"If yuh're goin' to arrest anybody," said Milo Hewitt, "lock Dawson up. He's been ribbin' Stone for a fight, ever since he come here. It was his knife."

"I can't take him in," Choctaw explained, "unless somebody swears out a warrant against him. Yuh want to do that, Milo?"

Hewitt hesitated. "Why, no. I guess not. It's Stone's fight."

AFTER a few more questions, Choctaw Smith came to where Stone was waiting. He had the cautious, solicitous, shrewd manner of the born politician. He was now serving his fourth consecutive term as sheriff of this county, the only obstacle to Geroe's complete political domination. It was a matter of record that Sheriff Smith had never failed to bring in his man. So long he had been sheriff, that his job was his very life.

"I'll be goin' to Butte, soon as Doc Hinckle finishes what he is doin'," he said. "Yuh can be saddlin' up. Milo says yuh can have any hoss in yore string. From the looks of things," he added, "the doc can do yuh some good."

"Goin' to lock me up?"

"Got to, till the judge passes on what he aims to do with yuh."

Wes Stone nodded, and left him. He glanced toward the ranchhouse. Framed in the window's yellow glow was Helga. A great hungering possessed him, for she was lost to him now. She had always been lost to him, he thought bitterly. But he had had dreams, the dreams that come to a lonely man who is fighting his way back.

He packed his saddle rigging down to the winter pasture, roped out a big buckskin, and rode to the gate that opened on the county highway. Waiting there, a deadly weariness came over him. The bandage he had placed over the gash in his side was soggy and hot. His very bones ached. When he closed his eyes he felt as though he were floating.

Sheriff Smith rode toward the gate. Behind him creaked the coroner's wagon. Stone still waited.

"Listen, Choctaw," he said. "You been square with me. I aim to be that way with you. I ain't goin' back. That's what I been waitin' to tell yuh."

"I'm takin' yuh back, Wes." Choctaw Smith fingered the butt of his gun.

"No. There's somethin' here I've got to finish. I'll give yuh my word—"

"Yore word," interrupted the lawman, "ain't good."

"I stood all any man could stand. If I have to choose between keepin' my parole and bein' a man—"

He swept off his hat, sailed it into Choctaw Smith's face. With the motion, he spurred the buckskin across the flat. A bullet screamed past. Low in the saddle, he raced into the blackness. If more bullets came toward him, he did not know it.

He glanced back. Choctaw was perhaps five hundred yards behind him. Stone cut a wide circle, stopping in a wash in which ran water. He tended his wounds. When he heard the other horse pass on, he angled toward the bunkhouse, to get his gun.

Milo Hewitt stood in the door. Admiration shone out of his tough face.

"I don't see how yuh stood it this long," he said.

"Yuh know, then?"

"Dawson told me. Keep the buckskin. I'll make it right with Nelse."

Stone put out his hand and Hewitt gripped it. There was no need of speech. He stepped past the foreman into the room. Bull Dawson looked up from the warbag he was packing. He grinned wickedly.

"Be seein' yuh, Kid."

Stone unpegged his holstered gun, and his wrist tingled in a way he knew of old. It was hard to pull his gaze from Dawson. He belted on the gun, buttoned his mackinaw and went out.

"Luck," said Milo Hewitt.

Wes Stone smiled stiffly. With one bleak look at the lighted window of the ranchhouse, he headed toward the Gunbarrel road. The old pattern was opening out. But now there was no sing-

ing within him. Bull Dawson and Cash Gaines had forced him back into the trail of the hunted. They had set the Law against him—the Law, as personified by Choctaw Smith, who always got his man.

Stone pushed the buckskin hard all that night, facing a wind that pierced his clothes as if they were paper, that penetrated to his bones' marrow. Reaching the timbered skirt of the mountains, he rode into a clump of pine, staked the horse on grass, and rolled out his blankets. Dog-tired though he was, fever kept him awake. Snowflakes touched his heated cheeks. Softly they sifted through the pine needles.

He awoke in a world of blinding white. Straight above him glowed the sun's pale disk. With an effort that ground his teeth, he pulled his sore, stiff body from the blankets. With a pot of steaming coffee inside him, he rode into the sheeted slopes.

He camped that night in the Ink Rocks, near where Carl had been killed. The naked cliffs lifted, stark and black, against an icily glittering sky. Howls of timber wolves ran the stillness, and the pistol-like reports of snow-loaded limbs. There was no warmth for him this night.

TOWARD the end of the second day he came out of a steep-walled pass along whose rims ran a great snow cornice. A gulch cleaved the west wall, and above it rose a slender plume of smoke. He rode into the gulch. One of its walls rolled back, enclosing a wide, snow-covered bench. A log cabin stood against the far wall, beside it a lean-to stable. Corrals covered almost half of the bench. Stone's eyes narrowed with thought. He had been looking for the station where the Burnt Valley rustlers delivered stock to the buyer. Perhaps this was it.

He tied his horse and went directly to the windowless front of the cabin. He made no sound in the soft snow. Boot tracks were imprinted about the door. Stone drew his gun, touched a shoulder to the door and went in.

His darting glance showed no living thing in this room. Tenseness slipped from him as an icy garment, and the grateful warmth seeped into him. He shuddered, not realizing until now how cold it was. He went to the stove.

"I been waitin' for yuh," said Sheriff Choctaw Smith, from the door. "Raise 'em."

Stone turned without haste. The sheriff held a gun on him. That would not have mattered to the Cimarron Kid, had it been anyone except Choctaw Smith. He lifted his hands.

Choctaw came cautiously forward.

"I figgered I'd passed yuh, that first night. So I been waitin' here, with my little smoke signal. Turn around."

Wes Stone turned around, facing the wall.

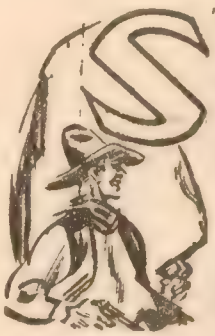
"Lay yore gun on the floor. Now. Hold steady."

An object struck the puncheon slabs, giving off a metallic sound. Stone looked down. Handcuffs.

"Reach down and snap 'em on," said the sheriff. "I'm watchin'."

CHAPTER III

Sheriff's Surprise



STONE picked up the bracelets. Straightening, he whirled, heaving the handcuffs at Choctaw's head. He followed the throw with his lunging body, scarcely feeling the bullet's rake down his spine. He struck Choctaw, slamming him backward against the stove. The stove toppled from its base, spilling red coals on the floor. The pipe fell upon the desperately fighting men.

Their tumbling bodies mashed out little flames flickering from the pine boards. Choctaw, b r e a t h i n g hard, wrenched free the barrel of his gun. But before he could fire, Stone had it again. The gun exploded. Stone looked dazedly at Choctaw lying limply on the floor. The mounting flames glinted brightly on the crimson that bubbled from the lawman's shoulder into the little pool beside his head.

Stone reeled to his feet, horror chilling him.

"I killed Choctaw!" he said.

A door seemed to slam in his face, shutting out all hope. With all the venom of his embittered soul he cursed

Bull Dawson and Cash Gaines. Standing there in the burning cabin, with blood trickling from a cut over his eye into a corner of his mouth, clothes torn half off him, and the sheriff prostrate at his feet, he swore a mighty oath. He would fight this thing through to the finish. Nothing would hold his hand, until Dawson and Gaines had paid the price of his ruin.

He lifted Choctaw out into the snow. In the lean-to a horse was squealing and kicking. Stone rushed into the cabin and got his gun. The cold air cut his smoke-charged lungs. He unfastened the the stable door and the horse rushed out. Rigging the animal, he led it to where Choctaw lay, and lifted the inert form across the saddle, roping hands and feet together. As he led the horse away from the heat and crackle, he was thinking of Carl Brandt.

When he reached the road, he would head the sheriff's horse homeward, then play out his hand. There was a lawless mining town, one called Warbonnet, beyond these mountains. He would see what Warbonnet held for him.

In the Gunbarrel road, he got down to tighten the ropes on Choctaw Smith. "You ain't dead!" he muttered.

Choctaw's purple lips moved, but no sound came from them.

Stone cut him loose. He stripped back coat and shirt, seeing the soggy hole in the chest. He cleansed the wound with snow, packing it with strips of his shirt. With snow he massaged the face and neck, until the grayness went away. Choctaw looked at him out of cold eyes. Stone guessed what he was thinking.

"I'll go back with yuh, till yuh're out of the mountains," he said.

"Yuh're my prisoner," the sheriff whispered.

Wes Stone grinned. "I'm the one that got away, Choctaw."

"But my record—"

"Is busted."

That night Choctaw Smith tossed in his blankets, mumbling disordered thoughts. He was so weak the next day that Stone at times had to hold him in the saddle. Stone could not leave him. Another day passed, before Bar 6 range appeared between a gap in the hills.

Cash Gaines was waiting around a bend. He held a gun, pointed at Wes Stone's head. Bull Dawson slid down the opposite slope, where he had been watching the road. Even more astonished was Stone to see Choctaw straighten in the saddle and cry out in a strong voice:

"He's my prisoner! I brung him in, didn't I? Give me his gun, Dawson."

Bull Dawson laughed at him.

"Shuck his gun, Bull," Gaines said crisply, his greenish eyes as restless as a puma's. "Yuh're wrong, Choctaw," he said, when Stone was disarmed. "He ain't yore prisoner—unless he wants to be."

"I'll have both of yuh behind bars!" the sheriff stormed. "I ain't ever lost a prisoner, and I ain't losin' this one."

"Yuh beller loud for a dyin' man," sneered Dawson.

Cash Gaines moved closer to Stone. "What'll it be?" he asked softly. "Back to the Big House—or open the safe for me?"

Wes Stone knew then how a trapped animal feels—the agony of the bone-crunching teeth, the long wait for the mercy bullet.

"I'll never open that safe," he said.

"That's foolish talk, Kid. Yuh've already broke yore parole."

"And yuh're the cause of it, cuss yore rotten soul!" He leaned out of the saddle, harshness grooved into his face. "All right, I broke it. But you'll never profit by it."

SOME thought traced its furrow between Gaines' eyes. He smiled crookedly.

"Better think it over, Kid."

"I've been doin' a lot of thinkin', about you."

Gaines stepped back.

"Take him," he said to the sheriff.

Dawson swore. "But—"

"He's my prisoner!" thundered Choctaw Smith. "Don't I always bring in my man? What you fellers want with him, anyhow?"

"Just hate to see him, or anybody else, go to the pen," Gaines answered shortly.

He crunched through the snow to his horse. He and Dawson rode away. The sheriff eyed them thoughtfully and turned to Wes Stone.

"What did they want with yuh?"

"You ought to know. Yuh're the Law."

"They ain't mixed up in this rustlin,' are they—and want yore help?"

"Yuh're the Law," Stone repeated coldly.

"Yuh're dang right, I am! And I'm goin' to be the Law, as long as this county has a sheriff. I get my man. I was goin' to trick yuh, right to the jailhouse, if them fellers hadn't horned in." His voice hardened. "Get on ahead. This time, there'll be no more throwin' things in my face—or I'll throw lead into yores."

Stone loped across the white reaches of the flat, headed toward Butte City. Out of the distance the roof of the Bar 6 ranchhouse tilted a gray square against the somber sky. His thoughts were bleak. And as though he had not suffered enough, Helga Brandt and Jack Geroe, on his white Arabian, rode toward them.

"I'm watchin' yuh," Choctaw warned.

Stone looked hungrily at the slender girl rising and falling rhythmically beside the big shape of Geroe. Made for each other, he thought. He seemed to see them from behind a mountain-high barrier which he could never scale—or through steel bars. And he thought of the hope that this girl had once given him as belonging to a past that had never been.

"Good work, Sheriff," Geroe boomed. His look at Stone was naked with hate.

"I always bring 'em in," Choctaw boasted, eyeing the politician keenly. "My record speaks for itself, I always say."

"Some folks would say you never ought to've let him get away," Geroe said.

Stone was conscious of no more of their talk. Helga was beside him, her blue eyes holding a warmth that moved him strangely.

"They told me, Wes," she said. "You're not to blame for breaking your parole. Milo and dad and I will help you."

Stone thanked her. "It's for the best, I guess."

"About your being the Cimarron Kid?"

"I ought to have told yuh, Helga. But I couldn't, till I was a free man."

"I understand."

Sheriff Smith's voice cut into the silence between them.

"Good idea, Jack. It'll be gettin' dark, by the time we reach Butte. I'd just as lief bring in a live man."

"Yes. A live man is better." Geroe angled his horse close to Stone. With his mecate he tied Stone's hands behind his back. "You won't be tempted now," he said as he finished the knot. "You might live longer."

Stone distinctly felt this man's hate for him. It was almost a physical thing.

"I aim to live a long time, Geroe," he said.

The image of Helga Brandt rode with him all the way to Butte City. It was all she could be to him now, a memory. Geroe's wife—but still his memory in the empty, gray days ahead.

* * * * *

Footsteps clumped along the brick floor of the jail corridor. The lantern-cast shadow of a man slid on the wall. It was Sheriff Smith. He set the lantern down before Stone's cell and unlocked the door.

"I want to see yuh in my office," he said.

Stone sat up on the cot. He eyed the sheriff warily.

"Can't yuh say it here?"

"Don't waste time askin' questions."

"Yuh've sprung one trap on me, Choctaw."

"This ain't a trap. Some men are waitin' to talk to yuh. Come on."

"What men?"

"Well—it's got to do with yore parole. They're from the court-house."

STONE went with him to the small office at the front of the jail. Cash Gaines and Bull Dawson were sitting against the poster-plastered wall. When Sheriff Smith locked the door anger rose up in Wes Stone as a wind-whipped flame.

"What is this?" he demanded of the sheriff.

"I've got a safe for yuh to open," Cash Gaines said. "Yuh can come of yore own free will—or there's other ways of gettin' yuh there."

"And not break yore word," Dawson sneered.

Stone's gaze had not left the sheriff. Choctaw's face was a mask, hard and set. Yet there was defeat in the droop of his shoulders.

"And I went through torment," Stone said bitterly, "keepin' my word for a thing like you."

"We're waitin'," Gaines said.

"They branded me an outlaw," Stone went on, his voice vibrant with scorn, "and they did right. But it's hypocrites like you who are the real outlaws. Yuh hide behind yore badge and fool the decent people who elect yuh. If yuh had any manhood in yuh, yuh'd blow out yore rotten brains!"

Though Choctaw's gaze was defiant, his shoulders appeared to slump a little farther.

CASH GAINES stood up, nervously fingering the handle of his Colt. His green irises shuttled between their narrowed lids.

"We're waitin'," he repeated.

Stone turned on him, a white line above his lip.

"I'll go, cuss yuh! I'll tell yuh to yore face why I'm goin'. It's to do what this crooked snake of a lawman ain't got nerve enough to do."

Gaines smiled. "Yuh're openin' that safe. What else yuh do, don't matter."

Wes Stone's smile was just as cold. "I figgered yuh wouldn't have any more use for me, after that. But the Cimarron Kid has been in tight places before—and got out, Cash."

Cash Gaines' smile became more twisted.

Bull Dawson laughed.

The three of them reached Cash Gaines' Y Cross ranchhouse about ten that night. Through the tobacco smoke that layered the front room, Stone saw four tough-looking men at a table, playing poker.

They looked up, sharp interest in their bearded faces.

"All right, boys," said Gaines. "Jake, go down to the pasture and rope out that blue roan for the Cimarron Kid."

A squat man got up from the table. His hat seemed to be screwed down on the tight wrinkles that corrugated his low forehead.

He came closer, his manner showing respect and admiration.

"I've heard about yuh, Kid. Proud to ride with yuh."

The door opened and closed behind him.

Stone dropped onto a bunk nearest the red-bellied stove. He was bone-weary. Sleep, like irresistible fingers, kept pressing down his eyelids. There was a drumming in his ears. He refused the bottle that Gaines offered and lay back on the tarp.

The three men were belting on their guns. Bull Dawson was eating, his teeth making a tearing sound on the meat. Gaines was oiling a Winchester. If Stone had any doubt as to Cash Gaines' complicity in the Burnt Valley rustling, there was none now.

This man was bad. And someone in this room, he was quite certain, was Carl's assassin.

Jake came back, waking Stone from deep sleep. They rode northwest, into the teeth of an icy wind. Stone was unfamiliar with the range, but he thought they were headed toward Warbonnet. He was unarmed. A prisoner, a man who was to die when he had opened that safe. He smiled bleakly. As he had told Gaines, the Cimarron Kid had faced a blank wall before—and he was still riding.

Cash Gaines set a fast pace. Like shadows the horses skimmed the frozen earth, their hoofs striking sharply. The gunbarrels cut a jagged line from the star-frosted sky, and the trail lifted gradually toward the mountains. On and on the horses pounded, their breaths like puffs of smoke.

They swept through a low pass banked with snow. Far below over the steepled spires of the spruce, hung a cluster of lights.

Warbonnet, thought Stone.

Two more hours of hard riding passed behind them. The gulch up which they were riding widened, and there lay the town. Boxlike houses climbed the gulch walls, one upon the other, store buildings straggling at their feet. Bars of light lay palely across the rocky street. The tinkle of a piano, a woman's high laughter, violated the sublimity of the majestic setting.

Gaines stopped in front of a two-story frame building. On its plate glass window was the sign:

"MINER'S REST"

The men hitched their horses to the long pole between the porch posts. Gaines went in first, then Stone, Bull Dawson at his back. They passed the length of the room, through a door at its back, into a passage. A light shone ahead.

CHAPTER IV

Warbonnet Web

CASH GAINES rapped twice on a door, opened it, and entered.

"Here he is, Boss," he said.

Stone had not thought Gaines had a boss. He followed.

Jack Geroe was sitting at a great mahogany desk. He smiled.

"Come in, Kid."

Astonishment cut Stone's feet from under him.

Geroe chuckled. "Pull in your eyes, man."

"I'm seein' a lot of things, Geroe." He came slowly to the desk. "You put the screws on Choctaw, to make him turn me loose. You're at the head of the Burnt Valley rustlers. And yuh've got the gall to be seen with Helga Brandt—you, the rat that had her brother murdered!"

"Get back!" Geroe bounded out of the swivel chair. "Bull—"

Bull Dawson grabbed Stone by the neck, hurling him against the wall. He stood there wide-legged, head pushed forward.

"Yuh got a killin' comin'. Don't make me give it to yuh before it's time."

Geroe sat again at the desk. "All right," he said crisply to Stone. "I've been to a lot of trouble, getting hold of you. It would've been easier to drag you off and have done with it. But I kept thinking you'd quit being such a jackass about your parole. Well, you broke it, so—"

"I broke it, because I could do more good by breakin' it."

The politician smiled, as though amused. "That's up to you. If I see it another way, that's all right, too. Now, here's the play. There's between twenty-five and thirty thousand dollars' worth of gold bars in the safe of the Tonto Smelter. That's the safe you're going to open."

Stone was thinking fast, but he saw no way out. Not yet. But there might come a break.

"Opening safes is out of my line," Geroe explained. "But from what I've heard of you, I know you can open it without any fuss. And that's the way I operate. Here's my proposition."

He drew a wallet from his vest pocket, took from it ten greenbacks and laid them on the desk.

"A thousand dollars, Kid. It's yours, when the job is done. After that, you're your own man. You can skip across the line into Canada, or come in with me. I'd be glad to have a man like you. That's all," he finished briskly.

Cash Gaines moved to the door.

Geroe was unruffled. "It's my way of playing the game. Can't blame me if the people are fools. There's money in it, Kid—and you live longer. Well?"

Stone had chosen his course. "My safe-crackin' days are over," he said quietly. "Even if I didn't know yuh never intend to let me get away alive."

Geroe stood up, as though he expected this answer.

"There are ways, Kid—"

"Lemme get my hands on him," Bull Dawson said eagerly, his voice whistling through the gap in his teeth.

"There are ways to make a man change his mind," Geroe said. "Watch him, Cash." He went out.

Dawson and Cash Gaines exchanged looks.

"In some ways I admire yuh, Kid," Gaines said to Stone. "But yuh're a fool. Don't yuh know Geroe can break yuh?"

"If he can't, I can," Dawson growled. "Why don't yuh make a run for it?"

Stone scarcely heard them. Even thought of torture was submerged in the struggle that ripped his brain apart. How could he outwit Geroe and bring him to justice? A legion of disordered plans charged his consciousness, but none that held promise of success. It was as though he were in a deep, dark well, the rope far beyond his reach.

Feet tramped the passage. The door opened. Stone was braced for torture, but for no such torture as this. Into the room, ahead of Geroe, walked Helga Brandt. Her face was pale, except for reddish marks extending from the corners of her mouth across her cheeks. Her hair was disarranged. Defiance blazed from her blue eyes.

Stone was instantly beside her. "Helga!"

"I heard what happened at the jail," she explained, with a look of utter scorn at Geroe. "I rode to the Y Cross, but you had gone. So I took the Ink Creek trail. I got here first."

"You rode the Ink Creek trail—at night!"

In his admiration of this girl, Stone forgot all else, except that she had dared almost certain death to save him. For this trail was little more than a deer run, clinging to the sheer faces of precipitous cliffs.

"And played right into my hands," Geroe said, without feeling. "Of course, I was sorry to have to lock you up, and gag you, Helga."

"She ain't in this, Geroe. This is between you and me."

"That suits me. You ready to start?"

"Don't do it, Wes!" Helga begged. "Don't trust him."

Geroe laughed shortly. "That's a fine way for you to talk about your future husband."

STONE'S anguished brain seemed to explode.

"Helga—the door!" he cried, and struck the lamp from the table.

With the motion, he dropped to his knees. Gun thunder shook the dark room. Stone lunged for the door. His Head rammed a man's stomach. Both went down.

"Wes!" screamed Helga.

"Get him—get him!" Geroe's shout boomed through the confusion.

Stone felt a hard object bore against his chest. He struck the gun barrel aside, the explosion searing his cheek.

"Cuss yuh!" yelled the man under him.

It was Bull Dawson. There was fear in the sound. Stone fought desperately to wrench the gun from that thick wrist.

"Wes!" shrieked Helga. "Wes!" She was close to him.

A man tumbled over Stone, cursing. Fire spurted from his gun, a quick double report. Stone felt the great body under him collapse. He rolled to his feet, striking Helga.

"Wes—quick!"

They were through the door. She was pressing her small caliber gun into his hand. Stone gripped the revolver, but no one came through the door.

Men were streaming into the hall from the saloon. Pushing the girl behind him, Stone backed swiftly to the alley door. It was locked. He drove a shoulder against the window at the end of the hall. The pane burst from its frame. As he swept Helga into his arms, a rain of bullets spattered the wall.

He turned, emptying the gun into the dark wedge of men running into the passage. They tumbled backward. Then Helga was through the window, and Stone followed in a long dive that landed him on his hands and head.

"Wes—they're coming at us from both sides!"

It was true. Against the faint light of the street, men could be seen crouching into the darkness between the rear of the buildings and the foot of the mountain which lifted its steep wall before them. The only way was back to the street, where there were horses. They ran toward those dimly seen figures of men, turned into a narrow fissure of blackness between two buildings.

"Here, Wes!" whispered Helga.

He took the cartridges she pressed into his hand, reloading as he hastened to the street. A cautious glance showed men guarding the horses hitched before the saloon. Other men, guns gleaming in their hands, moved watchfully in the street, heads jerking from side to side. This was Jack Geroe's town. He was the Law here.

Stone's fingers tightened on the gun handle.

"Yuh're all right, Helga," he said softly. "But I wish you hadn't come."

She laid swift pressure on his arm. "I don't, Wes," she murmured. "Milo is coming, too, with some of the boys. I left them behind, when I took the Ink Creek trail." Her voice quickened. "They might get here in time! They might come riding in any second."

She stopped, her fingers biting his arm. Cash Gaines passed along the earth walk, close enough for them to touch. A shout went up behind them, feet pounded hurriedly on gravel. More men rushed into the crack between the buildings.

Stone gripped Helga's hand and quickly rushed her upon the walk. A lone horse was hitched in front of a dimly lit building across the street and they ran toward it just as a man rushed out of the building.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Here they—"

Pistols belched flame. Then the man was on his knees, hands clamped to stomach, moaning faintly.

"All right, Helga!"

Stone reached for the reins of the plunging, snorting horse. A many-throated cry filled the street, from end to end. Dark tides of men poured toward them. Helga staggered back, struck by a front hoof of the terrified horse, and Stone caught her in his arms. Their chance to escape had passed!

"I'm all right, Wes—one of those buildings!" Helga panted.

Their feet pounded the walk. Stone stopped before a small, low frame building. He crashed the door from its lock, the force of his lunge piling him upon the floor. Helga slammed the door shut. Stone searched in the darkness for furniture with which to barricade the door. This was a barber shop, the odor of bay rum told him. He was wedging the back of a chair under the door knob, when Geroe's voice reached him:

"We've got you! Open that door, if you don't want to be shot down!"

Stone felt his way to the back door. He piled chairs against it.

Geroe's voice came again.

"We've got you, Stone! If you're any kind of a man, you'll let that girl out of there."

WES STONE turned cold. Yes, that was the only thing to do. He had not had time to think clearly.

"Helga—" he began, but she was answering Jack Geroe herself.

"I'm staying!"

Silence out there. Stone began to pull the chair from under the door knob.

"She's comin' out," he called.

"No! I'm staying!" She lowered her voice. "I'll never leave you, Wes. I'd rather die, a million times—"

"You've got one minute to open that door!" Geroe said angrily. "One minute, before we start pumping lead in there!"

Stone was kicking the chair loose. Helga clutched his arm, pleading:

"I'll never leave you, Wes! I'd rather die with you—Milo will be here any min-

"Up with Yore Dew-Claws, North! We Caught Yuh Red-Handed!"

THE blunt accusation made by the F S Foreman rocked Bob North of the Ladder 8 back on his heels. He had just seen the cold-blooded bushwhacking of Bert Fisk—and had come to report his findings. But he had a fresh-fired rifle in his hands, and things looked mighty bad for him.

"You fellers is rowellin' the wrong hoss!" North protested. "My rifle was fired—shore. It was a distress signal I just shot off."

"We heard yore shots, yes," said the foreman. "An' one of 'em kilt our boss! You killed him because yuh knew he had willed yuh the F S Ranch!"

It was a tough spot to be in—but it's only one of the tough situations that Bob North faces when he takes the trail of a grim range mystery in SPURS FROM BOOT HILL, a smashing action novelet by Walker A. Tompkins that races with six-gun speed from start to finish!

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

ute! Wait, Wes! I hear them now!"

He lifted his head. He heard only that angry murmur in the street. His arms came around her, crushing her. He kissed her.

"It's got to be this way, honey," he said.

"No, Wes! I—"

He kicked the chair from the door, swung the door open.

"Come out from behind that skirt!" a man yelled.

"I'll come out, Geroe," Helga said, in a steady voice. "But only if you promise to let Wes go free. You men, be my witnesses. Is there a man among you?"

SOMEONE laughed—a harsh, mocking sound. Geroe's bulk separated from the shadows.

"I'm doing the talking, not you," he said. "You can stay in there, or you can come out. Either way, Stone dies." Then he shouted: "Time's up!"

"Wait—she's comin'!" yelled Stone. "Helga—"

Evading his grasp, she threw her weight against the door. As it slammed shut, bullet-driven splinters stung Stone's face.

"Back, Helga!" he cried desperately.

A hot wind cut his cheek. Bullets ripped through the door, spattering like hail into the back wall. That these wolves would shoot down a woman struck fire to Stone's brain. That he was helpless to protect her fanned that fire to white heat. He pressed her down behind the barber's chair and made a low rush to the door. There was one way to save her.

He jerked open the door.

Amazement, wild joy shot through him. Riders were charging into the street, their guns blazing.

Milo Hewitt and the Bar 6 boys had come!

Geroe's gang scattered like leaves before a strong wind. As Wes Stone crouched forward, a bullet's close whine spun him around. He caught a glimpse of a man in the doorway and fired.

"Blast yuh, Kid!" the man screamed. It was Cash Gaines. He slid down the door frame, and lay still.

Milo Hewitt dashed past, the shoulder of his horse slamming a man to earth.

"Come on, boys!" he yelled. "Wipe 'em out!"

The ringing shouts that answered him were punctured through and through with shots.

Stone weaved across the street. Two men, locked in combat, pitched out of an alleyway before him. They fell, as one of them fired. It was Geroe who leaped up. Seeing Stone, his lips drew away from his teeth, and a single word leaped from between them.

"You!"

Stone's shot, to Geroe's brain, was an instant faster than the politician-outlaw's lead.

"Good work, son!" came a groan in the voice of Sheriff Choctaw Smith and Stone stared down at the man on the ground, revulsion sweeping him.

"I hope Geroe done a good job on yuh," he said harshly, and turned away.

Except for scattered shooting, at the edge of town, the fight was over. Cowboy whoops of victory echoed against the mountain.

Carl Brandt was avenged.

Stone hurried back to the barber shop. Helga's glad voice hailed him.

"Wes!"

She came to meet him, she and old Nelse Brandt. The old man was so shaken he could not speak. But his grip on Stone's hand expressed more than words ever could.

"I got Geroe," Stone said simply. "Choctaw is over here, bad hurt."

THEY crossed the street. Milo Hewitt had lifted the sheriff to the sidewalk. He was holding Choctaw's head up.

"I can see it now," Choctaw Smith said feebly. "I put my bein' sheriff ahead of everything else. Geroe told me he was goin' to beat me in the next election, if I didn't come in with him. He could have, so I went in with him."

He paused, breathing hard, and his gaze was on Stone.

"That's how come I sold you out, Wes," he confessed. "But Milo, he found out about it after one of his boys seen yuh leavin' the jail. He come to me and talked sense into my head." He sighed. "I done my best to undo."

"Yuh did all right, Choctaw," Hewitt said gently. "And yuh're goin' to pull through—don't worry about that."

Choctaw smiled wanly. "I have to live long enough to testify that Wes ain't broke his parole. I'm even goin' to

try to get the governor to pardon yuh, Wes."

"He's a man, no matter what he used to be," Nelse said gruffly. "I'd be proud to call yuh my son, Wes."

Helga's cheeks colored deeply. "Why, Dad!" she half-laughed. "He hasn't even asked me yet."

Wes Stone took her hand and they walked slowly away, conscious for the first time that the sky was filled with stars and that a great silver moon was lifting over the ridge.

Choctaw watched them and chuckled.

Tom Suratt Has the Fight of His Life on His Hands When a Cow Killer Stalks the Range

IN THE BLACKLEG HERD

A Swift-Moving Complete Action Novelet

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

COMING NEXT ISSUE

You men with tough beards, tender skin
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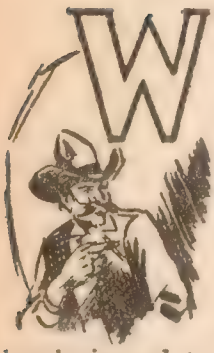
The CHEYENNE TRAIL

By REEVE WALKER

Battling to Clear Himself of a Robbery Charge, Alamo Paige Hits the Trail in Quest of the Scheming Outlaws Who Use a Shrewd Plan to Steal Army Payrolls from the Pony Express!

CHAPTER I

Branded as a Killer



WIND whipped mercilessly into the face of Alamo Paige, of the Pony Express as he sped through the moonlit night toward Cheyenne. His powerful dun pony was running low to the ground, steel-shod hoofs pounding rhythmically along the hard-packed, brush-rimmed trail.

There was a taut look on that tanned, weathered face of his as he tried to make up the time lost by a brief delay at the last Pony Express relay station, Cactus Wells, five miles behind him. Only ten miles to the long seventy-five-mile westward run from Pine Bluffs to Cheyenne remained. Then he would hand over his mail-laden *mochila* to another rider who would carry it on the next leg of the journey to the Pacific.

As he stormed through the wilderness night, Paige scanned the rugged terrain with a strict and unrelenting attention. More than once he had fought vicious running battles with warring Sioux and Kiowa Indians who hated the white men for invading their lands. Even now Paige was in hostile country and from any of the surrounding brush clumps or boulders painted red warriors might charge into the trail in an attempt to ambush him and lift his scalp.

The dun gelding raced up a wooden slant, tore down the grade beyond. Suddenly Paige hauled in on the reins, wariness vibrating his nerves. Below him in the middle of the trail sprawled the body of a man! The bright moonlight etched the slender, feathered shafts of arrows skewered into the ground around the man. And one of those arrows protruded from his chest.

The feeling of danger put a hot dryness in the Pony Express rider's throat. His hand dropped to his Dragoon .44 and his eyes slid back and forth among the stunted trees and bushes. But no one challenged his approach. There was no sibilant whir of arrows slithering through space; there were no savage battle cries. Yet the premonition of trouble lingered with Paige.

Dismounting, he strode up to the sprawled motionless figure and looked down at it, studying the face of the prone man. A broad white scar traversed the length of the man's cheek, carving an ugly path through the black beard stubble. And abruptly a muffled groan broke from the stiff lips.

Grimly Paige reached for the shaft of the arrow, but even as he moved brush crackled behind him and boots scuffed along the ground. Paige whirled from his crouched position to face another bearded man who was lunging at him from the thick screen of chaparral.

At the same moment the hulking, scar-faced man beneath Paige came to life. Even as Paige reached for his Dragoon .44, arms encircled his legs, tripped him on his face. Desperately he threshed around in the rocks and rubble, trying to roll over and drag his gun clear. He heard harsh laughter as another heavy body plunged upon him. Then a gun butt crashed against his skull.

"Paige shore fell for our little trick, Buck," rasped one of the men in wicked,

A COMPLETE PONY EXPRESS NOVELET

A rope swished over Alamo Paige's head, pinning his arms to his sides.

amused tones.

The words were the last sounds to penetrate Alamo Paige's consciousness as the deep roaring which had started in his ears swept over his mind and sank into a dark, rushing tide of oblivion. . . .

A THROBBING pulse-beat of pain in his skull brought the Pony Express rider slowly back to full awareness, how much later he could not guess. He lay where he had fallen in the middle of the trail. The renegades who had tricked him were gone. As he climbed stiffly to his feet, a swift glance at the position of the moon in the star-washed sky told him then that he had been unconscious not more than thirty or forty minutes.

Swearing harshly under his breath for falling for the clever ruse, and for failing to attach any immediate significance to the fact that the arrow in the man's chest had seemed to be imbedded only shallowly, he lurched toward his waiting pony.

For a moment he felt relieved when he noticed the *mochila* still intact on the skeleton saddle. Then cold fury hardened his countenance. Each of the four leather mail pouches in the *mochila* had been slit open with a knife.

Although all the mail packages had been mussed up he soon saw that the only package missing was an oiled silk waterproof container which had held five thousand dollars in currency destined for temporary Fort Skaghorn near Rock Springs.

Alamo Paige wondered, then, if the renegades who had attacked him had known he would be carrying that money. Seldom was money ever transported by Pony Express for, at a postage rate of five dollars per ounce, it would be costly to send even paper currency by that means. True, the package had been kept small and light by being made up of bills of large denomination, but it was still an unusual procedure.

The reason for it, Paige knew, was the scarcity of Federal troops in Wyoming and other territories. There was a crying need for every available soldier to subdue the warring Indian tribes who were becoming bolder in their bloody forays against wagon trains, trappers and isolated settlements, and a lack of adequate guards to protect any pay-roll shipment the Army might want to make to its widely scattered posts.

Accordingly, the Army was running the risk of getting money to its troops via the courageous, hard-riding, hard-shooting clan that made up the Pony Express messengers of Russel, Majors & Waddell. The money for each fort or outpost was being sent separately, at different times, to avoid any great loss in the event any one messenger failed to complete his run safely.

Though strict secrecy had been maintained, it seemed that the outlaws who had ambushed Alamo Paige had known just what to look for. The thought bothered Paige while it filled him with seething anger, and he wondered vaguely why his life had been spared.

Rearranging the letters in their pouches as neatly as possible, the Pony Express rider swung aboard the pony and headed straight for Cheyenne. He would remember the scar-faced man, and perhaps before many nights had passed the renegades might regret letting him survive. Dark savagery pinched Alamo Paige's features as he urged the pony into a hard run.

Paige was a short, narrow-waisted man with ice-blue eyes and deceptively broad shoulders beneath the tight span of his buckskin-fringed shirt. A flop-brimmed sombrero covered his rumpled thatch of sorrel-brown hair, and there was a subtle hardness to his profile, a taciturn immobility that hinted at spring-steel strength and determination.

Like most of the riders for Russel, Majors & Waddell, he was light in weight, scaling just a pound or two over a hundred and twenty. A narrow knife-belt girdled his lean waist but the gleaming bowie knife, an intrinsic part of his equipment, was gone, as was the Dragoon .44 which usually reposed in the basket-woven holster on his thigh.

BUT Alamo Paige did not care that he was unarmed. One driving thought actuated him now. He had to get to Cheyenne to report the attack, the loss of the Army money, after which he meant to make the rounds of the saloons and honkytonks to search for the bearded man with the knife-scar.

Paige took a fierce pride in his record with the Pony Mail. It galled him to realize he had been duped, robbed and

beaten, and he resolved to hunt down the renegades and square accounts no matter how long it might take.

Reaching the outskirts of town from the wooded trail, he caught the flush of yellow lamplight across the rolling dust. The dark blot of frame buildings rocked to the ribald talk and laughter of miners, trappers, gamblers and muleskinners as they bellied the bars and drank rotgut whisky or bucked the various gambling layouts.

Freight wagons moved ponderously along the rutted street. There was the occasional sound of a shot, the shrill warning that shot through his veins.

He saw a group of bearded men glance toward him. One man pointed toward him and yelled.

"There's Alamo Paige now!"

On the instant the group, grimly intent, started toward the Pony Express rider. Vaguely ill at ease Paige swung his tired dun across the street, angling for a dark alley. But two horsemen swept out of its darkness, spotted him and added their yells to the din.

A rope swished through the air. Paige saw it too late. He tried to curvet the dun away. But the rope settled over

ALAMO PAIGE

peal of a percentage girl's laughter from one of the dance-halls. And from somewhere farther along, a dull roar of sound that seemed to eddy from a concentrated throng of men.

Excitement seemed to be holding forth in Cheyenne, drawing men from saloons and stores, spilling them up and down the plank sidewalks. A bewildered frown pinched Alamo Paige's brows. What was up? Talk was high and shrill in the street. Something had happened. Paige knew that by the subconscious

his head, dropped around his arms, pinning them close to his side.

He was jerked from saddle and landed, sprawling, in the dust. He got up, going hand over hand along the rope, moving toward his attacker. But the rider backed his horse, snapped Paige off his feet.

"Here's Alamo Paige, gents!" yelled the roper. "We've got the lobo killer!"

Fighting the dry dust that entered his mouth, gritted against his teeth and set up a gagging sensation in his throat, Paige felt himself grasped by rough

hands. He was hauled to his feet and dragged along the street while the sounds of an angry, aroused mob flowed ominously around him.

His captors did not halt until they were in front of the Frontier Bank. Paige saw men milling about the entrance, saw them break to allow two others to pass out into the street, carrying a limp form between them.

Alamo Paige felt a sudden sick fear that pounded deep within him. He had no idea who the dead man was, but instinct and the yells of his captors told him that he was branded as the man's killer.

Then the mob stepped backward to let two men approach. The first was Lafe Harlick, marshal of Cheyenne, a russet-haired giant with flashing eyes, a red spade beard, tobacco-stained teeth, and a gruff voice and manner.

"We caught Paige sneakin' back to town," growled one of Paige's captors as the marshal came up. "Right after him killin' that bank president, too!"

Lafe Harlick drew his gun and a note of regret crept into his terse speech.

"Yuh was a fool to come back here after killin' Carey Ebring," he growled.

COLD shock rippled through Alamo Paige and a hard awareness flickered in his ice-blue eyes.

"Ebring!" he repeated. "I don't know what yuh're talkin' about! I just now entered Cheyenne after bein' attacked out on the trail and havin' my *mochila* looted."

Loud murmurs of disbelief from the pressing throng greeted Paige's announcement. Red blood suffused his weathered cheeks and he lifted his voice, shouting an account of what had happened.

"I'd like to believe that, Alamo, but —" Harlick shrugged and his gray eyes turned dark and inscrutable.

"Heck, yuh can see he's lyin'," growled Les Krome, the Cheyenne agent of the Pony Express run, standing at the big marshal's shoulder. He glared at Harlick. "You heard Ebring name Paige yoreself! Right before Ebring died, he gasped out how he'd been workin' late and three masked men busted in on him, forcin' him to open the vault. One of the buskies called out the name of Alamo Paige to his pard."

Les Krome was slender, hollow-cheeked and narrow-eyed—not a pleasant man. He had an irritating voice and had always seemed to resent Paige's reputation with the company.

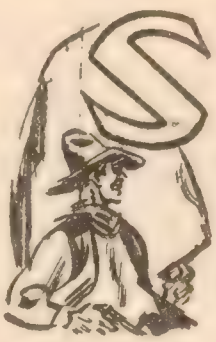
"Krome's right!" shrilled one of Paige's captors. "The word of a dyin' man ought to be proof enough. And if it ain't there are plenty of us here who heard that ruckus between Paige and Ebring the other night and know Paige had reason to hate the banker—yeah, and even turn owlhooter and killer!"

"Heck!" growled another grim-eyed man dressed like a trapper. "I always figgered Paige for a square-shooter, but back-shootin' goes against the grain. I say we ought to hang him."

Fierce cries of approval greeted the suggestion. The crowd swept toward Alamo Paige. Knuckled fists began to flail against him. He was kicked and mauled, and even the fighting, protesting marshal was caught up in that seething tangle of bodies.

CHAPTER II

Back to Cheyenne



STRANGLING fingers of dread clawed at Paige's windpipe. His breathing turned quick and shallow. He tore his right arm loose, connected solidly to a bearded man's jaw with his clenched fist. Then he was under a sea of bodies. Boots trampled him. He was dragged to his feet again, pummeled some more.

"You fools!" he gasped thickly, striving to lift his voice above the din. "I had nothin' to do with killin' Ebring! If one of them outlaws yelled my name it was to frame me. Mebbe that's why I wasn't killed back there on the trail—so's I could be here for a murder charge."

"It's kinda funny, ain't it, Alamo," inquired Les Krome, the Pony Express agent, with a sneering, malicious smile, "that after not havin' any trouble on yore run for months, yuh should get held up the first time yuh're carryin' special Army mail? I reckon yuh know what

I'm referrin' to."

Fury replaced the fear that had temporarily assailed Paige. He was being crowded by this mob and by Les Krome, and resentment was flaring in him, making him a dangerous man.

He thought bitterly of his argument with Ebring, the banker, in the Black Ace Saloon. Months ago Alamo Paige had invested his meager savings in a small Wyoming horse spread run by an old bronc peeler he had known in Texas. Some day, if things broke favorably, Paige hoped to get out of the Pony Express and raise horses.

But the old bronc peeler had run into hard luck. Indians had burned down his shack and corrals, run off his best mustangs. Cash had been needed to rebuild the place. Paige, though never liking the tight-fisted, miserly Ebring, had gone to him for a loan.

Ebring had agreed, with the stipulation that Paige sign over eighty per cent of his monthly wages until the loan was paid up, hinting broadly that he considered the Pony Express rider a poor risk. There had been hard words between them and Paige had told Ebring to keep his money.

Hardly grounds for a killing. Yet Alamo Paige, watching the hostility in the features of the hard-eyed men around him, realized that they were ready to believe the worst of him. Men he had regarded as friends, who admired his work with the Pony Mail, now milled about, seeking his life.

Eager hands seized Paige as he struggled to fight back. He was dragged across the dust toward a huge cottonwood. But before the mob reached the cottonwood there came a startling interruption.

"Stand back, yuh fools, and let me through!" demanded a moderately pitched but penetrating voice. "Stand back!"

There was crisp authority in that arbitrary command. Oddly enough some of the miners and trappers shifted and a man pushed his way through the throng to come up alongside Marshal Harlick and Pony Mail Agent Krome.

"What are you doin' here?" demanded Harlick gruffly.

The new arrival ignored the question and stared at Paige who was regarding him in puzzled wonder. Then the man whirled on the crowd.

"In case any of yuh don't know my name," he announced, "it's Henry Jason. I'm territorial manager of the Overland. I intend to spend a couple of weeks in Cheyenne checking up on ways to speed up our mail service and investigating the Indian situation. I just heard what happened and I agree with all of yuh that it's a terrible thing. But"—he turned to regard Harlick with a strange, half-smiling intensity — "I wonder if yuh won't be makin' a mistake, hangin' this Pony Express rider."

"Mistake, nothin', Mr. Jason," growled Krome. "Ebring hisself named Paige as one of his killers. Besides, I thought Ebring was a close friend of yores."

"He was." Sadness deepened Jason's voice and regret put a tinge of gray in his florid countenance. "I'll miss him plenty. In fact, I was looking forward to spendin' much time with him in the next two weeks. But I can't help thinkin' Carey Ebring might have been mistaken about who his killer was."

HOPE lighted the Pony Express rider's face as he regarded the Overland manager. Jason was clean-shaven and well-dressed. His cheeks were ruddy and his eyes which were a bland gray seemed to have strange hidden depths in them. He looked like a man who could be as hard as anyone if he were pushed far enough, but there was a kindliness, a tolerance in him also.

"I've never met yuh before, Paige," Jason said to the slender Mail rider, "but I've shore heard about yuh—and all of it's been good. I don't think Russel, Majors and Waddell are the men to hire riders who ain't completely trustworthy."

"Heck, it wouldn't be the first time the chance for easy money turned an hombre's head," growled Les Krome, who flinched as Jason gave him a hard, disapproving stare.

The crowd was beginning to get unruly. Men were pressing forward and from the shadows came the cry for a rope to hang Paige.

"Marshal!" snapped Jason while his eyes locked with Harlick's for a brief, tension-charged moment. "It's yore duty to protect this man." Jason lifted his voice. "Mind yuh, if Paige is guilty of killin' my best friend, I want him

punished to the full extent. But it's possible he was tellin' the truth in that story of his and he deserves a trial."

"We'll give him a trial right under this tree!" yelled a bearded, half-drunk miner.

There was no mercy in the lynch-mad throng. Blood lust burned in every heart, glittered from every eye, quivered in every throat. Death rode the night air.

"Thanks, Mr. Jason," said Alamo Paige, a forlorn, hopeless expression tugging at his lip corners. "But it's no use."

Jason's face hardened. He glanced meaningly at Harlick. Then he drew a gun from a concealed shoulder holster beneath his black coat with a speed that was amazing to Paige.

"Pull yore iron, Marshal!" he snapped. "One murder tonight is enough. If there's to be another death, let it be legal." He looked at Paige. "But Lord help yuh, if I'm wrong about yuh." Then to the crowd, he yelled: "We're comin' through! Stand back!"

There was something dominating and magnificent about the Overland territorial manager that upset the crowd's confidence and equilibrium. Firing a warning shot toward the sky he gestured imperiously to the bearded men holding Paige, shoved one man out of the way.

Then with Harlick on one side of Paige and himself on the other, Henry Jason bulled a path through the mob. Within two minutes he had Paige inside the marshal's office.

After the shock of giving in to the Overland man whose neat, well-dressed appearance was so different from the rough, buckskin garb of most of the men, the crowd came to life. Men surged back and forth in the street, shouting threats to the sky.

"Get him into a cell!" Jason ordered curtly. "And see that the mob don't rush the jail!"

Paige was rushed down the cell-block and pushed into the last cubicle at the end of the corridor. Harlick swung back to Jason, gave him a strange intent stare, then added with a sly look at Paige.

"He's in," he said, "but I won't guarantee he'll stay."

Jason's florid cheeks paled a little, for he was plainly worried, then he strode through the office and out in the street.

When he had gone Alamo Paige was assailed by an unutterable sense of loneliness. He knew that if it hadn't been for Jason's help he would even now be hanging from the cottonwood across the street from the bank.

RAGE took possession of him as he thought of the bearded men who had tricked him along the trail and who had undoubtedly left him live, knowing he would ride straight for Cheyenne—and into a murder frame-up!

Nor could he forget Les Krome. The express agent had seemed unduly anxious to see him hang. Why? There might be a good reason, at that. For, since only officials of the Overland had been told about those special Army payroll shipments, it was possible that Krome had tipped off some renegades to the fact that Alamo Paige would be carrying the first such shipment in his *mochila*. That, of course, would definitely tie up Krome to an outlaw gang, but Alamo would not put that past the man.

The depth of Paige's anger made him stride up and down the small, barren area of his cell restlessly. He was like a caged lion, eager for action yet trapped by adobe walls and iron bars, and at the mercy of a mob whose fury now seemed to have increased since Jason had snatched him away from them.

He heard the front office door slam, heard Lafe Harlick harangue the throng, ordering them to disperse. But the marshal was shouted down with angry threats as the men grew more unruly with each passing second.

Instinct told Paige that in a short time miners, trappers and Border riff-raff primed with rotgut whisky would work themselves into a frenzy and storm the jail. The knowledge put an uncertainty into his steps as he nervously circled his cell.

He stood on a bench and peered out through the widely spaced bars. The street was not visible, for the cell faced a rear alley. He got down again, strode to the locked door, then stiffened. Had someone called his name? He wasn't sure, but—

Something hard and metallic struck the window bars and dropped to the floor. Heart beating wildly, Paige

stooped down and picked up a paper-wrapped object.

It was a Dragoon .44 revolver! In the moonlight seeping through the bars he detected a written scrawl on the paper. He read it carefully.

Paige:

Heaven help you if I'm wrong about you, for Carey Ebring was the best friend I ever had. But I can't help thinking you didn't kill him. You're not the breed. Besides, Russell, Majors & Waddel seldom make mistakes in hiring men.

Here's a gun. The rest is up to you. The crowd is getting ugly. They mean business. Get out if you can and stay clear of Wyoming.

Henry Jason

Amazement seemed to stop the flow of blood in Alamo Paige's veins. Jason was going through plenty of trouble for his sake, even jeopardizing his position with the Overland. Paige was grateful for his assistance, but at the same time he was vaguely puzzled by it.

But this Dragoon .44 gave him a new lease on life, gave him a chance for freedom—and, Paige added as a grim afterthought—possibly a chance to hunt down the renegades who had branded him as a killer.

Shoulders stirring restlessly beneath his buckskin shirt, Paige waited for Lafe Harlick to return. Outside, the yelling became more intense. Occasionally a gun went off, blasting the night air.

"Better clear out, Harlick!" someone shouted. "We aim to get Paige. If yuh don't vamose we may hang you alongside him."

A strident roar greeted that. The roar reached new volume and Paige felt a cold hand fiddle up and down his spine. Then he realized the door had been opened and shut quickly. Harlick came charging down the cell block. There was a gray fear on the marshal's face and something else—a taut expectancy.

"Harlick!" Paige yelled. "Yuh've got to get me out of here!"

MARSHALL Harlick approached as Paige gripped the bars with one hand. The Pony Express rider's right hand cradled the Dragoon .44 against his trousers. The marshal came up close, his breath wheezing from his throat. Suddenly Paige's left hand shot through the bars, gripped Harlick's shirt front, dragged him near. Paige's right hand came into view, rammed the gun barrel in the marshal's stomach.

"Open up, Lafe!" Paige said through set teeth. "I'm rattlin' my hocks out of here."

For a brief instant the marshal struggled. His right hand dropped toward his belt. But he stopped when the .44 rammed his belly again. He peered owlishly at Paige and an odd, smiling malice danced in the depths of his gray eyes.

"Get this door open pronto!" Paige ordered, removing Harlick's gun from its scabbard.

Acting with frantic speed, Harlick produced his ring of keys, opened the cell door. Paige stepped out, grabbed Harlick by the shoulder, shoved him inside, and slammed the door. At that moment a heavy weight buffeted the stout panels of the front office door. Paige's lips tightened. He was aware of the significance of that sound. The mob was intent on smashing into the jail!

CHAPTER III

On the Dodge

PAIGE hurried to the padlocked rear portal, fumbled awkwardly until he found the right key and inserted it in the lock. The alley appeared deserted and Paige plunged boldly into the darkness, racing for the back entrance of a livery stable fifty yards away.

Without warning a man's shape materialized out of an alley and Alamo Paige collided with him. There was a brief scuffle. Paige pushed the man away, hitting him with loosely bunched knuckles and ran on. The man fell but recognized the Overland courier. Immediately his shrill cry rent the night.

"Alamo Paige is gettin' away! This way, gents!"

The crowd was moving toward the man, cluttering the alley when Paige bolted into the livery, knocked the hostler aside as the man was about to remove the rig of a rangy piebald. One leap took the light, agile Mail rider into the saddle. He whirled the piebald out

into the rear street.

A dark blot of men was converging upon the livery stable. As they saw him plunge into the street several guns blasted, the bullets singing wildly past his head. Then he sent the piebald racing into a thin stand of brush, body bent low over the horn, offering a small target for the gun-triggering men behind him.

Leaving Cheyenne in a wake of risen dust, Paige of the Pony Express headed straight for the timbered hills. Pursuit was forming behind him, but he had a good head-start and the piebald showed that it had bottom as well as speed in the headlong flight from town.

At the end of twenty minutes, by dint of hard riding and keeping to shaly ground as well as splashing two miles through the shallows of a creek, he had lost the hastily formed posse. However, he continued on, putting more distance between himself and Cheyenne before venturing to make a dry camp in a brush-rimmed pocket in the hills.

All the next day Alamo Paige kept to the rough country, never permitting himself to be skylined along the high ridges. Twice he spotted distant bands of horsemen and realized they were still hunting him. By nightfall he was spent and weary and feeling the deep and insistent pangs of hunger.

While his weariness and hunger grew, his anger and recklessness also mounted. He was tired of running, tired of the rôle of being a hunted man. What he wanted now was swift revenge against the renegades who had forced him on the dodge. Who they were, he had no guess, except that there were many such bands around—this country was a heaven for owlhooters. And he was sure that Les Krome was somehow tied up with them.

But he did know that his only hope of finding the killer was to return to Cheyenne. Once he reached this decision he abandoned the dry camp he had selected for the night and mounted the piebald. He turned the animal westward, then stiffened in the saddle. Dimmed by distance came the flat report of gunshots.

There were three shots, closely spaced, and afterward complete silence except for the rustling of the wind in the trees above him. The sound had come from the direction of the Overland trail between Pine Bluffs and Cheyenne. It occurred to Alamo Paige, then, that it was about time for the regular courier to be making the final fifteen-mile leg between Cal Edward's way station and Cheyenne.

With that thought came the grim premonition that disaster had again struck the Pony Express. It put a chill along his nerves, pushed all personal considerations into the background.

Quickly Paige whirled the piebald in the narrow trail and struck off in a northwesterly direction. He rode recklessly, careless of how much noise he made.

IT WAS a long four miles to the Overland trail. When he reached it, with the silvery moonlight filling the land with checkered patches of light and shadow, he saw no sign of riders or horses.

Forced to hazard a guess as to which way to turn, Paige swung west, galloped two miles, then skidded the piebald to a halt around a sharp bend when he came to the motionless body of a man lying face-down in the trail.

Jumping to the ground, the Overland courier turned the man over on his back, then drew back. A harsh oath broke from his lips. He was staring at the bullet-broken body of Ted Darcy, one of the youngest riders of Russel, Majors and Waddell.

Darcy was dead—killed without even a chance to draw his own gun. But what turned Alamo Paige's features as dark as a thundercloud was a Dragoon .44 lying in the dust near the corpse—a six-gun with the initials "AP" on the butt.

He picked it up, lifted the barrel to his nostrils and caught the reek of recently exploded gunpowder. A white-hot fire began to rage in his eyes and his fists clenched and unclenched spasmodically. Finding his own gun beside the murdered body of a Pony Express rider looked like a deliberate plant! He wondered grimly if the renegades responsible for the attacks upon himself and Darcy were taking advantage of the fact that he was on the dodge to make him the goat for their own depredations.

Going to Darcy's skeleton-saddled mail pony, Paige examined the bullhide *mochila*, found it had been slit open with a knife, the mail packages torn and letters scattered about. Instinctively he

knew the renegades had been seeking another Army pay-roll.

There was plenty of hoof sign around the scene of the killing and Paige immediately resolved to follow the well-defined trail which led northwestward from the Overland route.

He regretted the lack of time for properly disposing of Darcy's body, but at the moment it was more urgent to hunt down the killers. So he vaulted into saddle and sent the piebald lunging up the long slope beyond the main trail.

The bright moonlight made Paige's task comparatively easy until he reached a stretch of rocky shale. Then he had to trust to luck and keep going in the same direction. But after two miles he picked up the sign again, following it across two low ridges and down a steep grade which ended at a shallow creek bank.

Paige forded the stream and saw that there was no spoor on the other side. Guessing that the outlaws had ridden up the creek to hide their trail, he swung the p i e b a l d along the brushy banks. After twenty minutes his patience was rewarded when he saw where the tracks of three horses emerged from the mountain branch.

Three miles farther on, in a bowl-shaped c l e a r i n g almost completely ringed by brush and trees, the Overland courier came upon a log cabin. He kept to the cover of the pines as much as possible until he got close to the shack, then ground-tied the piebald and proceeded on foot.

Lamplight glimmered faintly from the windows. A deep frown pinched Paige's brow when he spotted half a dozen saddled horses tethered under a grove of pines beside one of the cabin side walls.

Alamo Paige halted at the edge of the clearing, searching the cabin and the open area in front of him for a full two minutes before venturing to race lightly across the grass. He came up to one window and through a crack showing between the lowered shade and the bottom of the window sash, he saw three hard-bitten gunmen in the front room.

None of them were familiar to the Pony Express rider. But in the smaller rear room Paige noted the bearded, knife-scarred man who had been one of his attackers on the Cheyenne trail. There was another brawny, bearded man with him and they were talking to a third individual out of range of Paige's vision, someone who evidently was a prisoner.

SCARFACE stood square and solid against the lamplight, his broad back to Paige as he faced the unseen prisoner whom Paige guessed lay bound to a bunk or cot.

"Have yuh changed yore mind about drawin' that map to Ebring's gold mine?" Scarface rasped.

Through the two-inch crack at the bottom of the open window came an answering voice, weak and full of pain, but still defiant.

"No. I'll never change my mind about that. Yuh k i l l e d Ebring—and yuh'll kill me, too."

The b e a r d e d, knife-scarred man laughed. It was a thoroughly hard and evil sound.

"Shore we k i l l e d Ebring," he admitted, "just like we salivated that old prospector Ebring had workin' that abandoned mine in Idaho. Ebring did a little talkin' to the wrong people and the prospector who struck that new gold vein let slip about how rich the find was and that Ebring had sent for you—his partner in the mine—to come West in a hurry. That's right, ain't it? Mebbe yuh didn't know we knew.

"But even with a load of rotgut in his brisket the old desert rat shut up when we tried to find out where the mine was. The s t u b b o r n fool even chewed up and swallered his copy of the map before we killed him. But he did tell us there was another map. You, bein' Ebring's pardner, must have that —or know it in yore head."

A muffled, weary gasp of rage and frustration came from the hidden victim of the renegades.

"You killers have been c l e v e r and ruthless, but yuh'll pay for it with yore necks some day. Not satisfied with robbin' the bank yuh murdered Ebring when he refused to tell yuh about the mine. And yuh've bragged to me about how Alamo Paige was framed for that murder and how yuh've used his escape from jail as a means of plantin' evidence against him in o t h e r attacks against Overland riders."

"Shore," admitted the bearded outlaw,

with a guffaw. Apparently he relished a recital of his misdeeds. "We haven't overlooked anything. The real boss of this owlhoot gang of ours is a smart man. He's after high stakes and nothin' will stop him from gettin' what he wants."

"He still hasn't found out where that gold mine is!" The shrill note of desperation and defiance rose in the victim's speech again. "I'll never talk! Yuh can torture me or do what yuh want 'cause if I did talk I'd be killed anyway."

Once more the bearded renegade laughed. His head turned and Paige caught the cruel lines of his thick mouth, the tigerish brilliance of his narrowed eyes.

"Yuh'll sing a different tune tomorrow," he predicted. "We found out yuh had a daughter back in St. Louis. Yuh think a heap of her and I reckon she feels the same about you—which is why we figger she's already on her way to Cheyenne now that she got yore wire about bein' sick and wantin' her bad. Only she won't ever reach Cheyenne if—"

"Yuh mean yuh sent for her?" gasped the victim.

The man must have tried to rise, for Paige saw the renegade's arm swing, heard the smack of bone against flesh. There was a sobbing cry of pain.

"Yuh blasted skunks!" the prisoner cried. "Jane is all I've got and—"

"Shore," said the renegade. "The boss'll be here tomorrow to see how good yore memory is about drawin' us a map to that mine." Paige saw the scarfaced man look up as another gunman entered. "Stay here and watch him," Scarface directed both men and stalked out of the room.

ALAMO PAIGE moved from one side of the window to the other, seeking to obtain a glimpse of the man who was being held prisoner. But his efforts were futile.

His lean, muscular hand dropped to the butt of his Dragoon .44 and for a moment he was swayed by a powerful urge to match his gun against the guns of the renegades inside the cabin. But remembering their hard-bitten looks, he realized that even if he succeeded in getting the drop on them, in any shoot-out against such odds he could not hope to survive.

He had no fear of dying, but if he died now it would serve no purpose. He might down two or three of the outlaws, but the others would be free to carry on their work and the knowledge which he, Alamo Paige, possessed of their activities and hide-out, and that some man who probably was prominent in the community was their "boss" would go to the grave with him.

What was more important was to capture that leader of this gang, and the Overland courier was convinced that the man could be found in Cheyenne. In fact, he was almost positive as to the identity of the gang's prisoner and that of their leader.

But before he acted he needed proof. And there was a slight chance such proof could be found in Cheyenne even though it meant returning there and risking capture. Should he fall into the hands of the mob again, Paige knew his doom would be sealed and he would be hanged without even the semblance of a trial.

But the risk had to be run, and once Paige reached that decision no power on earth could have stopped him. Accordingly, he retreated into the brush, climbed aboard the piebald and pushed the animal into a fast run toward Cheyenne.

CHAPTER IV

Doublecrossed

NIGHT life was booming in the rugged frontier town when Paige of the Pony Express reached Cheyenne. Men thronged the plank sidewalks. Freight wagons laden with merchandise ploughed through the ruts, the black-snake whips of the mule-skinners crackling over the heads of the straining horse and mule teams.

But Paige, not wishing to be recognized, turned aside from the main thoroughfare and angled toward the darkened rear streets. He proceeded with

extreme caution until he came up behind the bank building.

Dismounting in the thick shadows, he stalked to a window which had been closed up by b o a r d s. It opened on Ebring's private office and Paige guessed that it was here the outlaws had gained entrance to the bank the night of the raid. The bars had been ripped out and now boards took their place temporarily.

Paige worked frantically, yet as silently as possible, using his gun to pry away the boards. At last he climbed inside. Taking some sulphur matches which he carried as part of his regular equipment, he employed their guttering light sparingly while he conducted a hasty search of all the cabinets in the room as well as Ebring's desk.

He was about to give up the quest when he unearthed a slightly faded and wrinkled photograph wedged in the back of one of the drawers. One look at the picture and the writing beneath it brought a low, satisfied whistle to Paige's lips. He f o l d e d it quickly, thrust it in his pocket, and climbed out through the window.

Circling beyond two intersections, Paige finally arrived at the small frame building at the edge of town which housed the Pony Express office. He left his horse behind the office, moved silently around to the front, and peered inside through a crack at the bottom of the drawn shade at the small window.

When he saw the two men inside his face showed an odd satisfaction and he moved off the walk. He grabbed the knob of the door and lunged inside.

Les Krome and Henry Jason whirled at his entrance. Shock and amazement rippled their features.

"Alamo Paige!" shouted Jason. "What are you doin' here?"

"Keep yore dewclaws off that shoulder gun, *amigo!*" snapped the Overland courier, his Dragoon .44 jutting forward in his fist.

Jason's slender hand which had moved with incredible speed under his coat, dropped s l o w l y to his side. Krome seemed to be frozen by terror.

"So yuh're a renegade a f t e r all," rasped Jason, all the suavity gone from his voice, his pale gray eyes brilliant and hard. "After riskin' my reputation to get yuh out of jail—"

"That's enough, Jason—or whatever yore name is," Paige said flatly. His weathered face was stiff with unleashed rage. "Yore game is up. I just come from Carey Ebring's office. I found this picture stuck behind one of Ebring's desk drawers."

Paige thrust the photograph at Jason, but his eyes never relaxed their vigilance and the deadliness in them held both Jason and Krome still.

"The photo is signed 'Jason'," Paige went on relentlessly. "But yuh can see it don't look a bit like you. That's how I'm shore yuh're a fake. If I needed any further p r o o f there's that note yuh wrapped around the gun yuh threw into my jail cell last night. Yuh spelled Russel with two els and Waddell with one el, whereas it's the other way 'round. No one as important as a territorial manager would make a mistake like that about the company he works for."

A red tide of blood suffused the well-dressed man's face. He stood tense and half-fearful, like a cornered animal, and his voice though bluff and wrathful, carried no conviction.

"Paige, yuh're out of yore mind!"

"Shut up!" ordered the Pony Mail rider. "I don't know yore real name, but I figger yuh for the leader of them renegades who robbed the bank, killed Ebring and tonight drygulched another Pony Express messenger on the Cheyenne trail."

PAIGE strode two paces nearer to the fake Jason who cowered backward, terror gnawing at him like a slow, vitriolic poison.

"I found that Overland rider a while ago," Paige accused, the words clipping past his lips with a savage rancor, "and trailed his killers to that shack in the hills. Posted o u t s i d e I overheard enough to tell me what you and yore owlhoot pards are after. I'm bettin' it's the real Henry Jason who's a prisoner up there. Since no one in Cheyenne ever met any of the Pony Express directors yuh figgered on bein' safe to pose as Jason so's yuh could keep informed on when them special Army pay-roll shipments were comin' through.

"At the same time yuh're after a map to the gold mine j o i n t l y owned by Ebring and probably Jason. I know that old prospector was murdered for destroyin' the map and that yuh're tryin'

to force Jason to tell where that mine is."

The fake Jason's face was now a pasty white. His tongue licked nervously across his lips.

"That shocks yuh, don't it, *amigo?*" demanded Paige bitterly. "Yore mistake was in helpin' me get clear of jail so's yuh could use me to frame me for the killin' of other Pony Express riders."

Les Krome looked at the white-faced man, listened to his silent, savage cursing, then t u r n e d to Paige with an aroused expression in his eyes.

"Hang it, man!" said Krome. "I had yuh pegged wrong. Yuh ran a big risk comin' back here, but it looks like it was worth it. What'll yuh do with this jasper?"

"Take him to Marshal Harlick and round up a posse to raid that shack."

"I'll go along," Krome offered instantly.

Paige shook his head. Quick distrust was in his voice and mien.

"Yuh'll stay right here, Krome. I'm not forgettin' how anxious yuh was to see me hang last night. Yuh're in a good spot to know about them Army pay-rolls. For all I know yuh might be workin' with the gang."

Krome started to mutter an angry protest. But his voice was cut off by the down-chopping barrel of Alamo Paige's six-gun as it crashed against the top of his skull. The express agent toppled to the floor. Paige stepped over his prone body, motioned the other man toward the rear door.

"Out the back way," he o r d e r e d shortly.

Some of the fake Jason's courage had returned and with it the high color in his cheeks. He glared hotly at Paige and behind the fires of his rage there lurked a hint of sardonic mockery that puzzled Paige.

Outside, in the shadows, the Overland rider thrust his bewilderment aside and prodded the renegade in the back with his gun. They moved on through the darkness until the dark bulk of the jail building loomed up in front of them.

From the street came sounds of creaking wagons, loud-voiced teamsters, the clatter of m o u n t e d riders, the tinny clangor of a band from one of the honky-tonks.

At the jail's rear door Paige rapped on the panels with the barrel of his gun. A long interval passed, then the portal was opened a crack. Paige thrust the big outlaw ahead of him, pushed the door inward. Lafe Harlick jumped backward as he recognized the Overland rider.

"Alamo Paige!" he rasped. "Yuh've got gall comin' back here."

"Save yore breath," murmured Paige, "and don't go for yore gun. I've brought yuh a prisoner for yore calaboose."

"What kind of a sandy are yuh tryin' to run?" demanded Harlick, his right hand poised like a claw above his gun butt. "Yuh've got Jason."

"No sandy, Harlick, and this jasper ain't Henry Jason. The real Henry Jason is a prisoner in a shack up in the hills and this sidewinder is the leader of the renegades who salivated Ebring, stole that pay-roll *d i n e r o* from my *mochila* and murdered a Pony Express rider tonight."

"I don't believe it! You're the jasper responsible for that business and this time yuh're not gettin' away. One yell from me and I'll have a crowd on yore neck!"

ALAMO PAIGE stood rigid and immobile. His gun barrel moved to center on Lafe Harlick's chest. There was a cool and savage determination about Paige, as determined a ring to his talk.

"One yell will get yuh a dose of hot lead, Harlick," he promised, "if yuh don't listen to what I've got to say and look at this photograph."

The Overland courier extended the picture to the marshal while he gave a terse account of all that had occurred.

"Yuh can see easy enough this gent ain't Henry Jason," Paige concluded. "He's a fake. But we've got to move fast to save the real Jason and round up the outlaws in that cabin."

"Harlick, it's a trick!" shouted the renegade.

There was desperation in the florid-faced outlaw's words and his eyes bored into the marshal's insistently.

"You roundin' up a posse or not?" demanded Paige. "I've told yuh the skunks are after a map to an abandoned gold mine owned by Ebring in which an old prospector, w o r k i n' for Ebring,

found a new vein. Right now I aim to lift a murder charge from my head and I'll do it with or without yore help."

Lafe Harlick's towering, russet-haired figure straightened and the look of doubt slowly ebbed from his eyes.

"I can hardly believe it," he muttered. "But there's no denyin' that photograph. Reckon yuh wouldn't have risked comin' back to Cheyenne if yuh wasn't shore about it. Come on while I get my cell keys to lock up this jigger."

Harlick turned, moved through the cell block to the front office where a lamp burned on his desk. The outlaw stood r i g i d and white-faced in the middle of the room. Harlick went to the desk, then suddenly whirled and lunged to one side, shucking his six-gun as he leaped.

"Blast the snoopin' polecat down!" the fake Jason screamed to Lafe Harlick.

Harlick grinned at Paige. "Here's hot lead for yore belly, yuh poor fool!" he taunted. "I'm the man yuh want, not George Slade here who is a friend of mine I called in from Laramie to pose as Jason in this deal."

Alamo Paige's blood turned to ice. He swung his Dragoon .44 around in a frantic maneuver to beat Harlick's shot. But even as crimson fire belched from his gun muzzle he knew Harlick had beaten him. A heavy blow struck Paige in the shoulder, spun him into a twisting turn.

He sprawled to the floor as another bullet ripped into the boards close to his face. His first shot had missed Harlick. Now he threw down on the man who made a plain t a r g e t. Harlick moved swiftly. His left arm swept the lamp from the table. It struck the floor, smashed and winked out.

Darkness inundated the room. Boots pounded the boards near Paige and he realized that Slade was fleeing toward the rear. He let him go, conscious that the marshal was a greater menace.

Paige rolled into the corridor, gritting his teeth against the agony in his shoulder. Harlick fired at the sound, his bullet clanging against the metal cell-block door. The red flare of Harlick's shot was a beacon to the Overland courier who placed his answering fire a few inches to the right of that brief scarlet glow.

He felt the sharp recoil of the gun, heard the roar of the shot. It was punctuated by a shrill cry from Harlick, the plummeting fall of his body. In that cry was mortal pain, and Paige did not shoot again.

Already there was a loud clamor in the street. Men yelled, shuttling along the walk, converging upon the jail. Paige pulled himself up and lurched toward the rear. He stumbled outside, went to the piebald. He was dimly aware of receding hoofbeats s o m e w h e r e to the north and knew at once that it was the fake Jason racing ahead to contact his owlhoot partners at the cabin. The outlaw did not know w h e t h e r Harlick would down Paige or not, but his headlong flight told the Overland rider that the outlaw was not waiting to find out.

THERE was no time to switch to another horse so Paige drove the trail-weary piebald straight out of town and h e a d e d for the hills. Cheyenne dropped swiftly behind him and darkness and the rugged line of steeply slanting ridges began to take shape around him.

After ten minutes Paige pulled up to listen for the sound of hoofbeats while he reloaded his gun. But he heard nothing, neither ahead of him nor behind him, and he realized that George Slade, who had been posing as Jason, mounted on a fresh horse, had ridden well away from him.

The t h o u g h t sent anger churning through him as did the bleak memory of Lafe Harlick's treachery. Paige had not expected that, had not even considered the marshal might be crooked. As it was, he was fortunate that Harlick hadn't killed him.

The pain in his shoulder had became a steady, throbbing ache. But there was no time to stop to wash the wound or bandage it. Blood was trickling slowly down his arm. It was warm and sticky against his flesh.

Paige was not thinking of his shoulder, however. He was thinking of the desperate outlaw ahead of him and realizing that unless he beat him to the cabin, the real Henry Jason would undoubtedly be taken away or killed.

For Slade would not risk further chances of exposure. He would force the real Jason to divulge the location of the map—perhaps by torture—or take

him away to some new hide-out, removing the bank loot and Army pay-roll money which was probably cached in the shack.

A long journey over rough, forbidding terrain lay ahead of Alamo Paige. The piebald, already ridden hard this night, could not be expected to maintain a hard pace for long. Paige was hopelessly outdistanced unless—

Wait! There was a way! Over an abandoned cut-off trail that would save him at least five miles—if he was willing to risk his own life and that of the piebald. It was over a route that many horsemen shunned even in broad daylight because of its steep pitches, eroded barrancas and long stretches above the brink of a deep canyon.

But Alamo Paige had passed the point of thinking about his own safety. Recklessness had taken firm hold on him and his features were sterner, more implacable than they had been before as he dug his heels into the piebald's flanks and pushed on.

CHAPTER V

Sealed in Gunsmoke

AFTER two miles the wagon road dwindled into a faintly scarred trail. At this point Paige abandoned the trail and swung off into thick buckbrush and second-growth timber. Bristles and branches whipped into his face, tearing hunks of skin from it. Several times the piebald stumbled and Paige thought he would be thrown. But in each instance the gallant animal regained its stride and plunged on.

Time dissolved into an endless sequence of echoing hoofbeats, of long climbs along the face of shaly slopes, of swift, headlong descents into rocky defiles and dry sandy washes. Once or twice he wondered what progress the fake Jason was making along the regular trail. Then the necessity of watching his own route through this bleak stretch of country demanded all his attention.

The last three miles of the run took the piebald out upon a narrow ledge that hugged the side of a bare ridge. To Paige's right was impenetrable darkness—an unseen void of stunted trees and sharp-edged rocks that lay at the foot of the high-walled canyon below him. One misstep would send horse and rider plunging into space and down to crushing destruction on fanglike rocks and boulders.

Paige shut his mind to the horrifying possibilities of such a fall. But he breathed a fervent sigh of relief when he came out on a high mesa, sped across a brush-choked meadow and cut into the regular trail.

He saw the dark bulk of the cabin several hundred yards ahead of him at precisely the same instant that hoofs drummed loudly behind him and another horseman, lashing his mount furiously, burst into view.

It was Slade! And the renegade either recognized Paige or instinctively guessed his identity, for he let out a wild yell and triggered two wild shots into the night.

The Overland courier's lips stiffened and his eyes narrowed. He made no attempt to return the fire, but kicked the piebald into a last, straining sprint. The cabin was in darkness, which signified that the outlaws had gone to their bunks. But this racket would stir them up and Paige had to free Jason before the shoot-out which, he realized, was going to be against tough odds.

Even before the piebald had skidded to halt at the rear of the shack Paige leaped to the ground and bolted to the window of the back room. Arms shielding his face, he vaulted through the window. Glass splintered and crashed. Sharp slivers pierced his arms and hands.

His boots struck the puncheons and he rolled into a heavy body rising from a bunk. The man cursed and went for his gun. Paige lowered his head and butted the man under the jaw. He heard a sickening crunch, felt a sharp pain along the top of his head, then the shape in front of him dissolved.

There was shouting in the front room. The floor in there shook as men twisted out of their bunks. A light sprang up and a thin yellow stream of it filtered under the door. It was just enough illumination for Paige to see a second

gunman lunge toward him. Muzzle light flared brightly in Paige's face. A bullet burned hotly past his cheek, then his own Dragoon .44 was thundering a wicked song, slamming the outlaw to the floor in a limp, sagging heap.

"Jason!" Paige queried tensely, his eyes trying to penetrate the gloomy reaches of the room. "Are yuh there?"

"Yeah. Who is that?"

"Alamo Paige!"

"Alamo Paige!" Jason repeated. "I thought—"

"No time for talk now," Paige whispered hoarsely. "Are yuh tied?"

JASON stumbled across the room toward him, felt for his arms with trembling hands.

"No. They untie me at night so I can sleep."

"Good." Paige bent down to one of the fallen outlaws and appropriated the man's gun. "Take this gun. We're in a tight against tough odds. We're goin' to have to shoot our way out."

There was yelling outside and the sound of someone entering the front room. Slade was bawling at the outlaws to charge the back room.

"Alamo Paige is in there, you jaspers! Blast him down before he frees Jason!"

Even as Paige shoved the six-gun into Jason's hand the door to the rear room burst open and a bulky man thrust himself into view. Paige flung a shot at him and the man spilled backward, unhit.

"Come on, Jason!" urged Paige, and barged into the front room, and leaped to one side.

Jason, thin and gaunt, and blinking against the light, followed him and flung himself to the other side of the door as a volley of lead blasted at both men.

Through swirling gunsmoke the Overland rider had an indistinct view of the florid-faced outlaw, Slade, and three other gunmen, ugly red death snaking from their jolting gun bores.

"Blast yuh, Paige, this is yore finish!" howled Slade and triggered a shot at the Pony Express rider.

Paige felt the slug rip into the flesh under his left arm. Breath drove from his lungs in a *whooshing* sound. But he jumped farther away from the door, brought his gun to bear on Slade and flipped hammer. The outlaw grunted in pain, stared unbelievably at a reddening hole above his belt buckle and started to come apart at the knees.

Hot fury drove him to a desperate last-chance shot at Paige. His gun was lifting on a level with Paige's chest when Paige fired again, putting a bullet squarely in Slade's heart.

Beside Paige, Henry Jason cried out as a bullet knocked him to the floor. But the real Overland manager was game. He came to one elbow and his gun began to spout flame as another outlaw dropped. In falling, this outlaw struck his companion's arm, jarring his aim, and the bullet intended for Jason's heart thudded into the boards above his head.

It was all the time Alamo Paige needed. His third shot spun a bearded giant of a man off his feet and his next shot drilled a neat hole in the forehead of the renegade whose aim had been spoiled.

Suddenly, then, it was all over except for the continuing echo of those shots in Alamo Paige's ears, the swirling gunsmoke and the compelling weariness and pain that was creeping over him.

He stumbled toward Henry Jason, but the man was struggling to his feet under his own power. One look told Paige that he had suffered mental and physical torture at the hands of the renegades. His gaunt cheeks were bruised, his shirt torn, his chest lacerated by deep, ugly scratches. There were lines under his blue eyes, but the fierce light of new hope was burning in his face. And despite Jason's bruises and abrasions Paige could see the close resemblance of of the manager to the photograph which he had discovered in Carey Ebring's bank office.

"PAIGE, yuh're the last person I ever expected to see up here—after what those skunks told me they'd done to yuh. But I'm shore glad to make yore acquaintance." Jason smiled weakly, his voice slightly hoarse. "How did yuh ever find me and trap that impostor? Nobody in Cheyenne had ever seen me before."

"It's a long story involving Marshal Harlick who was the actual leader of the renegades," Paige told him. "Reckon I can give yuh the rest of the information on our way back to Cheyenne. We've got some bodies to haul back to

town. The important thing is that we've rounded up Ebring's murderers and the men who killed Darcy earlier tonight."

"Darcy dead? That's too bad. He was a good man." Jason's face turned somber. "I guess that explains where they got that second Army pay-roll they brought up here tonight."

"What about the bank money?" Paige demanded.

"It's under the floor of this room." Jason gripped Paige's hand. "There ain't much I can do to thank yuh for savin' my life, but—" he broke off and his face lit up abruptly. "Wait! I'm forgettin' that gold mine. With Ebring dead and havin' no kin, I reckon yuh're entitled to a share."

"No gold minin' for me," Paige demurred.

Jason grinned, noting the tired lines in Paige's countenance.

"Seems to me," he murmured, "I heard the outlaws talkin' about how yuh got into an argument with Ebring over a loan for a hoss ranch. Whatever it is yuh need I insist on helpin' out. In fact, as yore superior in the Pony Express, I'd be pleased if yuh'd accept."

"Okay, if yuh put it that way." Alamo Paige grinned wanly.

Jason gave himself over to somber reflection.

"I just happened to think of my daughter," he said. "The outlaws sent for her, plannin' to kidnap her. She's due in on tomorrow's westbound stage. I'll have to meet her. That also reminds me how them renegades nabbed me after I got off the stage in Cheyenne three nights ago. They pretended to be from the Pony Express office and I went along with them. Before I knew what was happenin' I was in an alley and somebody had knocked me out with a gunbutt."

"Yuh can thank Les Krome for that. He was probably—"

"No," insisted Jason. "From the way the outlaws spoke I know Krome wasn't in with them. Ebring no doubt let the news slip out that I was comin' to Cheyenne and somehow they discovered the real reason behind the visit."

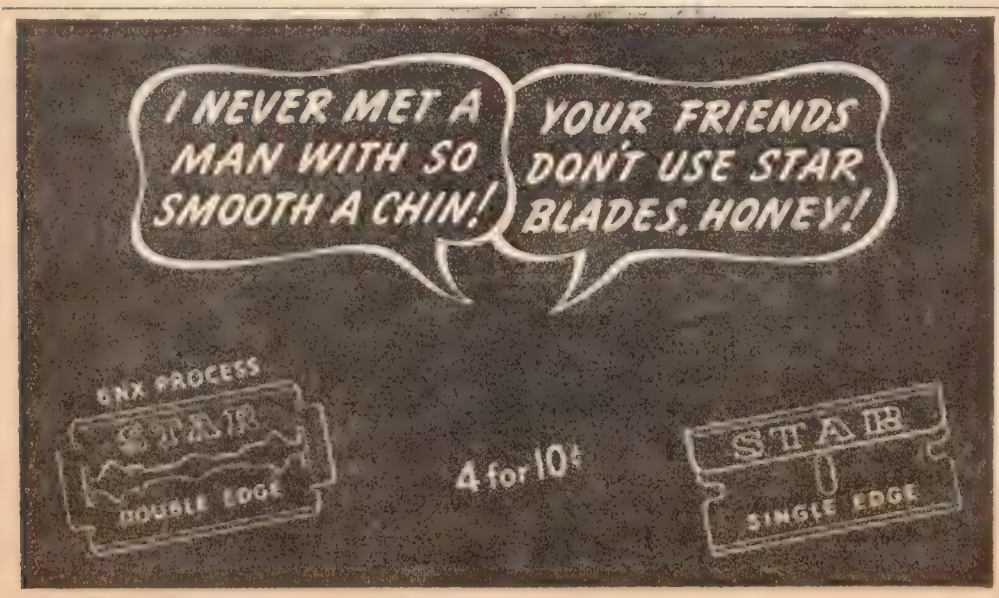
Paige nodded grimly.

"I'll tell yuh more about that later. It was Ebring and that old prospector who let the news out."

Paige, remembering how he had slugged Les Krome, grinned.

"Reckon I'll owe Krome an apology for taggin' him with my gun. But that can wait. Right now we've got this mess to clean up. Besides, we could both use a sawbones. Also, there's the Pony Express. I've already missed one of my trips and I'm honin' to get back in harness for Russel, Majors and Waddell."

Next Issue: Alamo Paige in RAIDERS OF THE WILDERNESS



LINE FENCE LEAD

By SAM BRANT

Brad Marrow Reads Sign to Solve a Range Mystery!

THE rest of the Circle D outfit got to figuring that a right good cowhand was getting tangled in his own rope when Brad Marrow started reading a book. Not that they objected to anyone reading, but it was the way Marrow kept reading the same book over and over that got them wondering.

"Yuh mind tellin' us the title of this literary masterpiece that has yuh so spellbound, Brad?" asked old "Latigo" Wade, who had gathered up a right good education somewhere in his travels. "We are kinda interested."

"It's called 'The Science Of Crime Detection,'" said Marrow. "Mighty interestin', too. Did yuh know that most people don't notice the details when they look at somethin', Latigo?"

"Some don't," said Wade. "Other's got sense enough to read sign. Yuh aimin' to be a lawman, Brad?"

"Considerin' it," Marrow said. "Anyhow, I'd shore admire to try my hand at a little detectin'."

"Shore." The old waddy nodded, soberly. "And I'd like to bake an apple pie. If I did I'll be bound the results would be just about as bad as yore detectin'."

Brad Marrow just shrugged, and went on reading his book. He quit when the Old Man appeared and told him that he wanted him to ride fence over on the south range. Marrow didn't argue about it none. He roped and saddled a horse from his string and got going, but he stuck the book in a saddle-pocket and toted it along with him.

"There's a man who's plumb liable to read hisself out of a job," muttered Latigo Wade somberly as he watched Marrow ride out of sight. "Too bad—him bein' a right good hand."

It took Brad Marrow about an hour to get over to the south range without crowding a horse any, and he was doing a whole lot of thinking as he rode, mostly about the detecting he would like to do. That bee had been in his J.B. ever since "Hap" Wilson, who made the mail deliveries from the post-office in Little Creek to the ranches thereabouts, had been held up and robbed three days ago. The leather bag containing the mail had been taken from Wilson—and it was still missing.

MARROW had never figured that Wilson was a man to admire much. The mail carrier was a lean-faced, middle-aged man who owned a fair-sized ranch, but was mighty tight about money. He sure knew how to make it double or triple for him, too.

Take that business of Old Man Doyle,

Brad Marrow's boss on the Circle D, say. Old Doyle had been in a tight for cash not long ago, and had given Hap Wilson a mortgage on the spread for a three-thousand-dollar loan. To Marrow, that looked like his boss' mistake, and that the Circle D was due to change hands right pronto.

"Trouble is that mortgage is due tomorrer," muttered Marrow, as he rode along easily. "If the Old Man's brother back East don't send him the three thousand like he promised he would by today, it shore looks like the boss will lose the Circle D."

The more Marrow got to thinking about Hap Wilson, the less the waddy liked his thoughts. Any man with all

the *dinero* Wilson had cached, and who still would take a job carrying mail just to get hold of a little extra money wasn't worth shucks in Brad Marrow's estimation.

Marrow had given a heap of thought to that hold-up, too, for he had happened to be in town when Wilson had ridden in all excited, and reported the mail stolen. Sheriff Carson had ridden out alone to investigate the scene of the crime, and it looked like that had been a plumb bad mistake, too, for while the sheriff had been investigating, four men had appeared and had started shooting at the lawman. Carson had shot one of the men, but had been forced to ride away fast to keep from being salivated.

Sheriff Carson had returned later with a posse. But of course by that time there had been no sign of the four men who had attacked him.

"Reckon that's the sheriff's business—not mine," decided Marrow. "But I shore hope the Old Man won't have to lose the ranch."

There was a barbed wire fence stretched for miles along the edge of the Circle D's south range. Reaching it, Brad Marrow rode along the fence, making sure that it was not broken down, or that any of the cattle had become tangled in the barbed wire.

He rode slowly, for there was no hurry about it. Riding fence as he was doing now was likely to be an all-day job. He tested his powers of observation as his horse plodded along. Here was a place where a fence post had rotted away and been replaced by a new one; there, the wire had been repaired.

Marrow got to thinking that it was Hap Wilson's range on the other side of that fence. If Wilson foreclosed on the mortgage and combined the Circle D with his Flying W he would have about the largest ranch in that part of the country.

"And I shore hope that don't never happen," muttered Marrow.

He halted his horse and sat in the saddle studying one of the fence posts. The ground around the bottom of the post looked as if it had been dug up, and the hole carefully filled in again. At first it looked to Marrow as though the post might have been replaced, but he saw the post itself was an old one.

"Something mighty strange about that," Marrow decided. "I'm goin' to see what I can learn here."

He was carrying a short handled spade tied to his saddle. He rode over and left his horse ground-hitched in the shade of some trees, then took the spade and went to work.

He dug around the post until he had quite a good-sized hole. Then he lifted out the post and kept right on digging. Finally he grunted as his spade struck something. He shoved away the dirt and revealed a leather mail pouch.

"So that's what happened to the mail that was stolen from Hap Wilson," Marrow thought, pretty grim. "Now why would anybody go to the trouble of buryin' that mail pouch?"

HE LIFTED the leather pouch, dusted it off, and placed it over on the grass! Then he lifted the fence post and thrust it back into the hole. He was working the timber into the ground when a horseman appeared and came riding swiftly toward him.

As the rider drew closer Marrow saw that he was Hap Wilson. But the waddy didn't pay the ranch owner much mind. He was too busy working with the fence post.

"So yuh found it," growled Wilson, as he halted his horse. "That's too bad!"

"Too bad?" Marrow glanced at the owner of the Flying W in surprise. "Seems like yuh'd be glad I found the missin' mail for yuh, Wilson."

"Well, I ain't glad." Wilson suddenly snatched a rifle out of a saddle boot and fired at Marrow. "Yuh know too much, Marrow."

Marrow ducked to one side as the rifle roared—the bullet missing him and tearing a hole in the edge of the fence post the waddy was holding. Before Wilson could fire again Marrow had his own gun out. The Colt roared and the ranch owner reeled in his saddle, the rifle dropping from his hands as Marrow's bullet plowed into his shoulder.

"So yuh hid that mail sack yoreself!" snapped Marrow as he dropped the post and leaped forward to catch Wilson's horse by the bridle with his left hand. "Yuh made up that story about bein' robbed of the mail by a masked man!"

Along about then a bunch of riders appeared. It was Sheriff Carson and some of his men still out looking for the

bandits who had robbed the mail. They had four scared-looking waddies riding with them as prisoners, and Marrow saw that the four men were part of Hap Wilson's outfit.

"So yuh got him, and with the evidence, Marrow!" shouted the sheriff, sounding like he was right certain what it was all about. "These men from Wilson's outfit have admitted that he hired them to fire at me and act like they was outlaws when I was lookin' over the spot where Wilson was supposed to have been robbed."

"That's a lie!" shouted Wilson. "I didn't do any such thing!" He was swaying weakly in his saddle because of his wounded shoulder. "I trailed Marrow here, and when I accused him of being the one who robbed me of the mail he shot me."

Marrow didn't even bother to deny it. He went to the mail pouch, opened it, and searched through it. There was nothing in it but letters and a few mail-order catalogues. Marrow looked quickly through the letters and drew one out.

"Here it is," he said, holding it up. "It's for John Doyle from his brother in New York. See? It has Kenneth Doyle's return address and name on the envelope."

"What's that prove?" demanded Sheriff Carson.

Before Marrow could answer he saw the Old Man and Latigo Wade riding toward the fence, so he waited. The waddy handed his boss the letter and Doyle tore it open eagerly.

"Here it is!" cried Doyle. "The check for three thousand dollars my brother promised to send me so I could pay off that mortgage that Wilson holds on the spread."

"Which is why he made up the story about the fake mail robbery and hid the mail sack in the ground by the fence post," said Marrow. "If yuh didn't get the money from yore brother he could take over the Circle D, Boss. Reckon Wilson figgered he would discover the mail sack hidden by the fence after it was too late for yuh to do anything about the mortgage. He'd claim the robber must have hid it there, I guess."

"All the same I'm arrestin' yuh for robbin' the U. S. Mail, Wilson," said the sheriff. "But first we better head for yore spread so's yuh can turn that mortgage over to John Doyle."

THEY rode away after the Old Man had thanked Brad Marrow for what he had done and left the waddy feeling mighty proud. Finally Marrow was alone with Latigo Wade.

"Yuh got that book with yuh, Brad?" asked the old waddy.

"I have," said Marrow. "Why?"

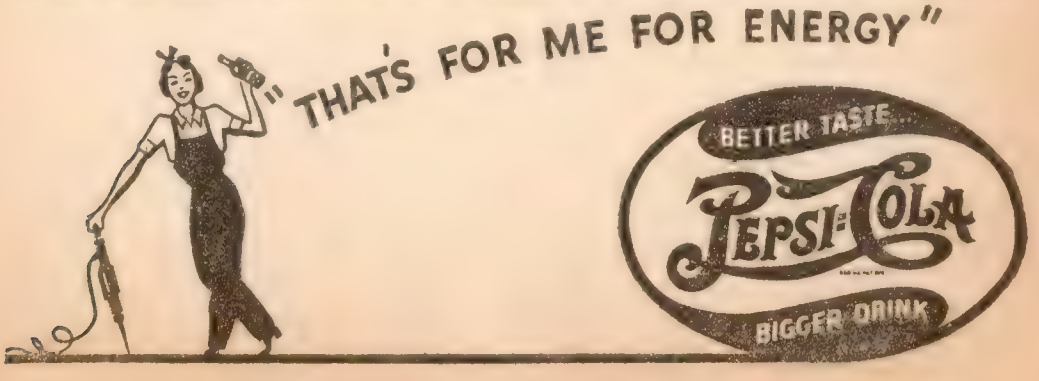
"I want to read it," said Wade. "When just readin' a book will teach yuh to notice things like the dirt bein' dug up around that fence post I figger I ain't too old to learn."

"Yuh'll have to do me a favor before I let yuh read that book, Latigo," said Marrow.

"Shore, anything yuh say," said Latigo Wade eagerly. "Just name it."

"All right," said Marrow. "Just put that fence post back in place and fill in the hole. It's a mighty warm day for diggin'."

"Aw, shucks," said Latigo disgustedly, as he picked up the spade. "Never mind the book. I just ain't smart enough to be a detective, or I wouldn't let yuh trick me into doin' this job!"



Raine spun with sudden violence and both men went down in a tangled heap

A Complete Navajo Raine Novelet

BULLET

CHAPTER I

Gun Toll

THEY rode out of the draw and onto the flat stretch of the hardpan, and the beat of their horses' hoofs was muffled by the night silence. They reined in where Sugar Creek curled into the thin grove of cottonwoods. The ranchhouse ahead of them bulked squatty and black.

Vick Webber slid out of his saddle, and his move was a signal for the others behind him to dismount. They were a hard-bitten crew, thin-lipped and cold-eyed, their hands never far from low-slung guns.

"There ain't no lights," "Hutch" Torby grunted. "Mebbe old Jeff Shawn ain't here."

There was a sullen edge of menace in Hutch Torby's voice. He was a short man, wide-hipped and thick-shouldered, with the strength of an ox in his long arms. Beside him, bony Cass Page put in a dry, sardonic word.

"Hutch, yuh're always huntin' the dark side of things. If it was rainin' gold nuggets, yuh'd growl because they wasn't sacked up for yuh."

Another man, "Link" Evers, grinned

An Arizona Ranger Gets Proddy When He Runs

BALANCE

By JACKSON COLE

mirthlessly in the darkness. He was a silent, slab-muscled man who was given more to throwing murder lead than idle talk.

Vick Webber said nothing as he stood there in the darkness. He was tall and had high, bony shoulders. An old bullet wound dimpled his left cheek, pulled that side of his mouth into a perpetual half smile. Deadliness was the key to Vick Webber. It was in his tawny eyes, in the almost catlike poise of his long body, in the way he studied each detail with sharp interest.

The thin lemon-slice of a moon marked the hour as close to midnight. The ranchhouse was lightless, as Torby had said, but that was how Webber had wanted it.

"Jeff Shawn is in, all right," Webber said grimly. "His punchers are in town for the rodeo, but Shawn stayed here. I didn't spend the afternoon watchin' this place for nothin'. I'll take care of the old man. The rest of yuh spread out and keep yore eyes open."

THERE was a cold glint in Vick Webber's eyes as he strode toward the ranchhouse. There was something hard and inexorable in his movement.

Dust padded the hoof-chopped front

into a Racket That Calls for Swift Justice!

yard and muffled the fall of his boots. He was like a shadow going up the plank steps and across the porch. He paused at the front door, listening intently. There was no sound within the house.

Once he thought he caught the distant hoof-beats of a jogging horse, but the sound faded before he was certain. He didn't let it worry him. The gun hands he had stationed around the house would take care of any rider who was unlucky enough to happen by.

Vick Webber lifted the latch, and eased the door open. He moved into the room with the caution of a huge cat, paused again in the darkness. Now he could hear the low snoring of a man in another room. That would be old Jeff Shawn, owner of the Arrow J Ranch.

Webber drifted across the room, down a short hall, and into another room. It was the old rancher's bedroom. Through the faintly broken darkness, Webber could see Jeff Shawn's gaunt shape on the bed that ranged along the far wall.

"I'd kill him now," Webber thought, "only I want him to know what kind of a fool he's been!"

There was a lamp on the table at one side. Webber pulled a gun with his left hand, lifted the glass chimney of the lamp, scratched a match and touched the flame to the oil wick. Yellow light flowed through the room as he replaced the chimney.

Webber turned, his eyes cold and hard. The light was beginning to stir Jeff Shawn awake. The rancher's snoring stopped, and then the oldster rolled over and sat up in his blankets, blinking.

"It ain't good manners to sleep when you've got company, Shawn," Vick Webber said with icy sarcasm.

The oldster's eyes swiveled around as though he had been cut by a whip. Surprise rubbed the sleep from his stare, then came a flare of anger.

"Webber!" he broke out. "Yuh've shore got yore share of gall! What yuh doin' here?"

Webber grinned with cold mockery. Not yet had the rancher noticed the Colt hanging in his hand.

"That question seems to be a habit with you," he drawled. "Yuh popped it the last time I was here—a week ago."

Understanding was slow coming to old Jeff Shawn.

"A week ago?" he finally let out hoarsely. "But that jasper was masked, and he—"

His words trailed off. Fear began to show in his faded eyes. Then for the first time he noticed the gun in Webber's hand. He stared at it. Then his eyes lifted, and the gray of ash crawled along his jaw.

"Yuh ain't masked, now, but yuh're that same polecat," he bit out harshly. "Yuh're the head of the gang that's been makin' folks pay off for protection they don't need." His temper flared, hot and savage. "Yuh wasted yore time comin' here, Webber. I ain't payin' money to yuh now or any time. Get out!"

Webber grinned crookedly. "I didn't come after money, Shawn," he said softly.

It was a thinly veiled threat that silenced the oldster. Jeff Shawn stiffened on the bed, his glance flicking to his gun-belt hanging from the chair in the opposite corner. It was no more than two strides away, but it might as well have been a mile. He couldn't live to touch it, and he knew it.

VICK WEBBER chuckled mirthlessly.

"Sort of in a tight, ain't yuh, old man?" he jeered. "Mebbe now yuh wish yuh hadn't talked so much. Yuh've been hurtin' my business, tellin' everybody they were fools to pay off for protection. That's just what you need now—protection. It's yore bad luck yuh didn't buy some when yuh had the chance."

Old Jeff Shawn's breathing turned quick and hoarse.

"Yuh won't get away with it, Webber! Kill me, and yuh'll die for it, cuss yuh!"

Vick Webber's smile was sarcastic, deriding.

"Yuh seem to be worryin' a heap more about me than about yoreself," he drawled. He started his gun up slowly. "Yuh're goin' to have a bad accident here, Shawn. Yuh're goin' to be shot, and yore house is goin' to burn down. It's too bad yuh talked so much, ain't it?"

It was then that old Jeff Shawn made his try. It was a desperate move, but age had cramped the speed from his muscles. He rolled off the bed, lunged frantically for his gun hanging from the chair. He didn't touch it.

The killer's slug was like an invisible fist hitting him. It caught him under the left arm, smashed him around in a loose, stumbling circle. He was dead when he hit the floor.

There was only one thing left for Vick Webber to do. He knocked the lamp from the table, watched it shatter against the floor. Flames flared; smoke boiled upward, hot and choking.

Grinning cruelly, the killer turned and strode out of the house.

CHAPTER II

Job for a Ranger

IT WAS the crash of the distant shot breaking through the night silence that halted "Navajo Tom" Raine. Saddle weariness had been dogging him the last several hours on the trail, but the faint smash of that single shot swept a subtle change through him. His shoulders remained as straight as before, his angular face as calmly expressionless; but where before he had been relaxed, he was now intent and alert.

He tugged in slightly on the reins and uttered a soft word to the magnificent blue-roan stallion beneath him.

"Easy, Wampum."

Raine turned his head slightly to center the direction of the shot, but the echoes rolled to him from all sides. He waited, motionlessly, trying to pick up some other sound, but none came.

He might have been an Indian, for all the expression there was in his dark features. His face had been weathered by long exposure to the elements, to the hue of saddle leather, and his black hair, worn Navajo style, hung down to his square shoulders. His clothes were a queer mixture of range garb and the soft buckskin of an Indian.

Yet with all of that, there were undeniable signs that spoke of the white blood in his veins—the cool, greenish flecks that glinted in his narrowed, ever-alert eyes, the balanced sag of the heavy guns he wore. And the horse he straddled was an animal no Indian's pony could ever equal. Wampum was a giant in speed and endurance, a blue-roan stallion that was supreme in a land that worshiped fine horses.

This man was Navajo Raine, the most feared of all the Arizona Rangers operating under Captain Burt Mossman to bring law and order into the Territory.

Unconsciously, Navajo Raine murmured a maxim of the Navajos who had befriended him after his father, "Powder" Raine, had been murdered during the Tonto Basin War.

"'Two shots mebbe kill deer; three shots mean deer got away. One shot means kill.' What I'm wonderin', Wampum, is who fired that shot, and what did he kill?"

Then his shifting glance picked up a faint pinpoint of yellow light deep on the floor of the valley below him. Light from a ranchhouse window? But no oil lamp burned with that ugly ruddy glow.

Some sixth sense nagged at Navajo Raine's mind, an inexplicable conviction that was like an icy wind fanning down his spine. That shot had meant murder! And that growing pinpoint of light was a ranchhouse beginning to burn! He knew those things as though he had witnessed the entire act of violence.

He swung the reins in his hand, jabbed blunted silver spurs into his roan.

"Let's go, Wampum!"

The giant stallion pounded down the slope of the ridge in a wild plunge of speed, hurtling over out-croppings of granite, crashing through tangles of sage and mesquite. The stallion set a pace that would have been fatal to many another animal, and Navajo Raine rode low and tense in his saddle.

The slope of the ridge flattened out on the floor of the valley. Half a mile ahead, Raine could see the faint spray of blackness that marked a grove of trees outlined against the paler darkness of the sky. The ranchhouse was just north of the cottonwoods, its windows like red eyes glaring through the night.

THEY hit a narrow creek, splashed through without a break in speed. Raine saw the figure of a man race across the ugly red rectangle of a window in the house, then faintly over the pound of Wampum's hoofs heard a hoarse shout.

"Someone ridin' up, Boss!"

"Talk won't kill him!" another voice ripped out, harsh and strident. "Use yore guns when he's close enough."

A significant thought knifed Navajo Raine's brain. So the killers hadn't yet had time to get away! But were they the killers? Maybe they were honest punchers who thought he had fired the ranchhouse and was returning to watch his dastardly work.

The distance shortened to a quarter of a mile, to a scant hundred yards. Raine sent a yell of warning toward the burning house.

"Friend comin' up! Don't shoot!"

Again came that strident shout, sharp and ugly with kill lust.

"Plug him—plug that jasper!"

Navajo Raine saw an orange flick of gun flame, then an instant later heard the blare of the shot, and all doubt left him. Those men were killers, not honest punchers. Another gun broke in, then a third, a fourth. Lead churned through the night air around him like invisible hornets. He sheered Wampum off at an angle, and heard a man's shout of fury.

"He's breakin' for the trees. Boss, we ain't got time enough to smoke him out! He may have pards with him!"

"Clear out then! We're finished here anyhow. Clear out, cuss it!"

The press of Raine's knees straightened the run of his stallion. He pulled his guns, chopped them savagely toward the shadowy figures racing off to the north away from the house. He heard a man squall out an oath at the roar of his shots, but the fleeing horsemen did not halt. They were lost in the night by the time he pulled up in front of the burning ranchhouse.

Raine hit the ground in a run that carried him up the porch steps to the front door. The door was open, and through the billowing clouds of black smoke he could see flame licking into the living room.

He pressed a bandanna over his nose and mouth, moved into the room, pulled by the thought that whoever had been shot here might still be alive. Heat all but overwhelmed him from all sides, and he bent low to breathe the cleaner air near the floor. A single glance through the red haze of the room told him no man had been shot here.

He forced himself on across the room, choked and gagged by the smoke that filtered through his bandanna. Heat seared him, and he could grope his way only by opening his eyes for a brief, burning glance. The walls were sheeted with fire that within minutes would fill the house with a heat that no human could stand, and Raine knew a moment of primitive, almost unreasoning fear that he might be trapped by the flames.

But he drove himself on. He stumbled down a short hallway, into a side room that was a red glare of flame. He hit the side of a bed, pitched to his knees. His lungs were crying out for air, his heart slugging the walls of his chest. He shoved to his feet, took a step, felt his boot strike something soft and fleshy. A body!

He bent, using groping hands for eyes. The man was dead. He knew that with his first touch.

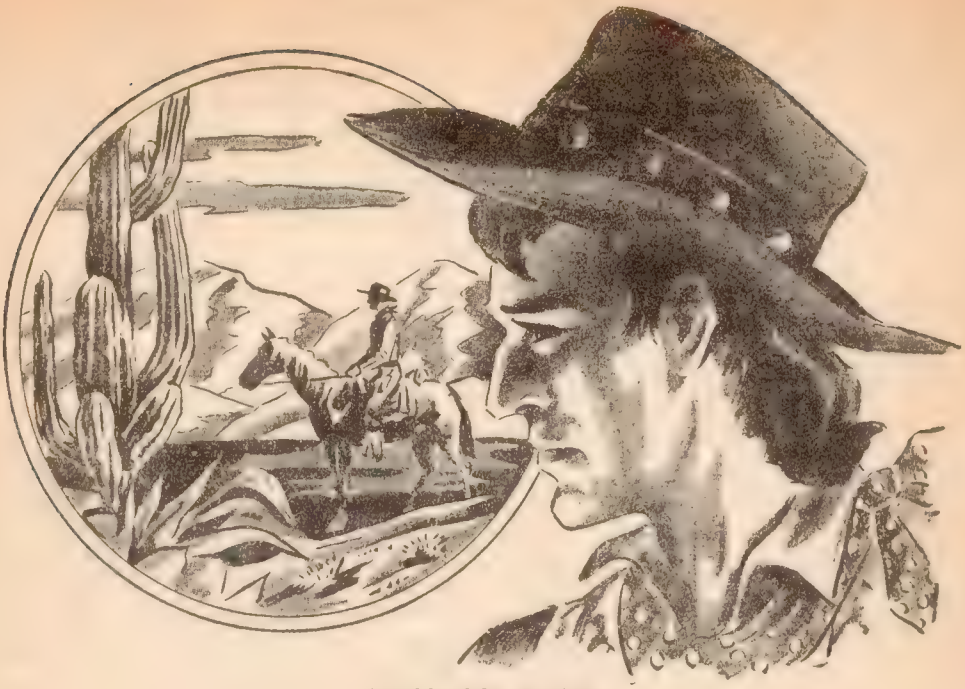
EVERY instinct told him to break out of the house while there was yet time. He could not hold that stale air in his lungs much longer, and yet he knew a single breath of this smoke-clogged air would be fatal. He pulled the body into his arms, strained himself erect, sick from the heat and smoke. He couldn't see when he flicked his eyes open. Only a solid wall of flame was where the doorway had been.

He turned, butting his way along the wall with his shoulder, until he located the window. He stepped back, shattered the glass with a kick of his boot. The backdraft the breaking of the window created turned the room into a roaring chaos of heat.

He scissored his right leg through the window, twisted around and pushed himself off balance, falling through the opening. The shock of his body hitting the earth partially revived his sagging senses, and the cool, clean air flooded his lungs like wine.

It took the last dregs of his strength to drag the dead man to a safe distance from the burning building, and when that strength was gone he sank to the ground in oblivion. . . .

Dawn was wiping out the last shadows of night when Navajo Raine rode into Hangtree's hoof-chopped street. From a distance he had made out the evidences of a holiday celebration.



NAVAJO RAINE

Flags were draped along the street, bright-colored banners proclaimed:

WELCOME! CHOLLA COUNTY
ROUNDUP!
RODEO—STOCK SHOW
FUN AND PRIZES FOR ALL!

Even at this early hour, the street was beginning to be thronged with men and women and children. Ranchers were knotted together here and there, talking business or laying bets on the day's rodeo contests. Women were converging on the stores, eager for the newest gossip and the latest in dress styles. Punchers were filing in and out of saloons, sporting gaudy shirts and bandannas and forty-dollar Stetsons.

Navajo Raine took in every detail with somber interest. On the surface the town was filled with excitement and good-will, but beneath the surface ran a current of treachery and violence. That was what had brought him here, and grimly he remembered Captain Burt Mossman's last words of warning at Ranger headquarters.

"I can't give yuh much to build on, Tom," was what Captain Mossman had said, "but plenty of ructions have busted loose up there at Hangtree. A gang of outlaws have got hold of the county, and nobody seems to know who they are. They're killers, and their game is to sell protection to the ranchers and business men in town. The protection is against what that gang does when a man refuses to pay off.

"Two ranchers have already been murdered and burned out. A small-time prospector who had hit a rich pocket balked at payin', and was blowed up in his mine shaft. Yuh'll have to start from scratch, but I want that county cleaned up. Wire me if yuh need help."

Remembering those words, Navajo Raine wondered if the body tied behind his saddle was that of another man who had been murdered for refusing to pay extortion money to the outlaw pack.

Raine was near the center of the town before he was noticed. A puncher, already half seas over, lurched out of a saloon, saw him and let out a whoop.

"Injun!" he bawled out. "Blast me sober, if we ain't got an Injun visitin' us!"

IT WAS not the first time Navajo Raine had been mistaken for an Indian, something which never failed to stir pride through him. He had every

reason to admire and respect the red race. When his father, old "Powder" Raine, had been murdered during the Tonto Basin War, young Tom had been forced to flee into the mountains to escape outlaw guns.

He had been dying from hunger and exposure when he had been found by a band of friendly Navajos. They had taken him in as one of them, and for years he had lived among them, absorbing their customs and habits and wisdom.

Now the jubilant whoop of the puncher centered every eye on the street at Navajo Raine. Silence clamped down almost instantly as men saw the body lashed behind his saddle, then someone broke the hush with a harsh oath.

"That's a dead man he's packin'—a white man! Dang it, somebody go after Sheriff Bernay!"

A man broke down the street in a hard run as Raine slanted in toward a hitch-rail. He could feel hostility boiling around him from the gathering crowd, but no expression reached through his wooden countenance. A man jostled along the stallion, bent a sharp glance toward the face of the dead man, and spun around violently.

"It's old Jeff Shawn!" he yelled harshly. "It's Jeff Shawn—dead!"

CHAPTER III

Outlaws of Hangtree

NAVAJO RAINE swept a narrow glance across the crowd, but if any members of the killer gang were present their expressions betrayed nothing.

Every eye on Raine was hard and suspicious.

There was a stir of movement along the outer edge of the crowd, and Raine saw three punchers pushing toward him, followed by a tall, slender girl who was no more than a year out of her 'teens. Some man bawled out a strident order.

"Here come the Arrow J punchers with Miss Judy! Get out of their way, dang it!"

The three punchers fanned out at the head of Navajo Raine's horse as they broke through the inner fringe of the crowd. The girl came more slowly, as though afraid of what was coming. She faltered past the three punchers, then halted, her face going paper-white as she looked at the body on Raine's stallion.

Still in his saddle, Raine caught the only sound that came from her throat that hushed second, a bitter, sobbing word:

"Dad!"

She swayed slightly, and Raine slid quickly from the saddle to hide her view of the body lashed behind him on the stallion.

"Ma'am," he began softly, "if I'd had any other way of bringin' him here—"

Violence flared as though whipped up by the sound of his voice.

"And he's got the brass to stand there talkin' to Miss Judy!" a man shouted hotly. "He's probably the polecat who killed old man Shawn, one of the outlaw gang that's been bleedin' all of us! He's tryin' to make out he's innocent by bringin' Shawn in, the cussed Injun!"

One of the three punchers, a tall, thick-shouldered redhead, moved past Judy Shawn, cursing in a hard voice.

"Jeff Shawn was the best boss a man ever had, Injun! If yuh killed him, yuh're goin' to be sorry plumb quick!"

He halted a scant yard from the ranger, for the first time staring into Raine's green-flecked eyes. Fury was in every line of his big body, and it darkened his face as he understood what he saw.

"Yuh're not an Injun!" he rasped.

Navajo Raine shook his head slightly.

"I wouldn't be ashamed of it if I was," he said softly. "Don't make a mistake yuh'll regret, Red. I didn't kill this man. If yuh want to know who I am—"

"Don't listen to his lies, Brann!" a voice in the crowd roared out. "He's yore meat. Take him!"

Navajo Raine knew what was coming, and he knew he could not avoid it. He knew it as he saw bunched muscles roll a gray track along "Red" Brann's jaw.

Raine heard Judy Shawn's faint, "Don't, Red!" but that did no good.

Brann's fist crashed out with the power of a rock crusher. But danger had ridden with Navajo Raine as far back

as his memory stretched, and he had learned every trick of fighting with gun or fist. He didn't want to do it, but he knew he could not avoid it. He swayed away from the blow, rolled inside it, and shoved forward with a lunge of his long legs.

Raine did not stop once he got started. His left crashed into Red Brann's middle, and his right was a battering twin of that blow. He heard air gush from Brann's throat, felt the man's big arms grope for him as he crowded in closer.

He smashed a left to the heart, and saw Brann's legs melt under him. But the other two punchers were leaping forward to take the redhead's place, one tall and lanky, the other short and chunky.

RAINE did not slow his forward movement. He knew his only hope was to get his back to the wall of the general store across the plank walk. If the crowd closed in on him now they would have him from all sides.

He would stand a chance if they could get at him from but one direction.

He sidestepped to the lanky man, but the fellow was a tall shadow that faded away from him. The chunky man closed in, and Raine only partially evaded the man's clubbing right. It was like raw fire scraping along his jaw. It forced him to change his direction.

He smashed his left to the man's chin, then slid his hand down to grip the front of the cowboy's shirt. He jerked him close, full into his shoulder-hammered right. He felt the chunky man go lax, and from the corner of his eye saw the lanky jasper lunging in toward him. He planted one boot firmly, spun with sudden violence, and sent the chunky man's sagging body plummeting into the lean man.

Both went down in a tangled heap, and then Raine had the store wall to his back, facing the crowd with cold, narrowed eyes. Silence clamped down on the street like a steel vise, and through it Raine sent his icy challenge.

"I got only two fists, but I'll oblige all of yuh that feel in the mood to sample 'em," he drawled. "This ain't hardly the time or place for a fight, seems like to me, but yuh ain't givin' me much choice."

Then a short, rock-jawed man broke through the inner fringe of the crowd, a gun whipping up in his blunt right hand. The nickeled badge of his sheriff's office gleamed brightly on his vest.

"I got a place for tough roosters like you," he grated. "Come along with me, mister, and I'll see how tough yuh are."

* * * * *

Sheriff Sam Bernay was a man whose temper was always tied with a short string. He fumed and snorted as he stamped back and forth across the narrow jail office, his gray-shot hair thrusting out under the brim of his felt hat like bristles.

"Shore I know who yuh are!" he slapped out. "Nobody but a high-heeled cyclone could lay out Red Brann with Slim Havers and Chuck Macon tossed in to boot. That's Navajo Raine, and I never had the luck to see you in a fight, even this one. But I've heard of some of yore knuckle-busters, and I caught a thin look at yuh once when I was down-state for a pow-wow with Cap'n Mossman. Yeah, yuh're Navajo Tom Raine, all right."

Seated in an office chair, Navajo Raine smiled faintly.

"Yuh've got a rough way of saying howdy," he drawled. "Yuh shoved me around like I was cottonwood bait when yuh brought me here."

Sheriff Bernay halted his restless pacing, swung around stiffly.

"It was just to keep yore hide whole a little while longer," he growled. "Bringin' Jeff Shawn's body to town marked you as the jasper who busted in on them outlaws at Shawn's ranch last night. Take it from me, if they'd knowed who yuh shore enough are, yuh wouldn'ta lived to get out of that crowd."

Raine's lips thinned out slightly. "Like that, huh?"

"Just like that," the lawman rapped back. "They're the worst bunch of hellions I've ever tangled with, and they've made a outlaw heaven for theirselves out of my county."

He began stamping back and forth again, throwing resentful words over his shoulder to the Arizona Ranger.

"I've never had anybody call me a plumb fool as a star-toter, but I ain't been able to pick up any kind of a line on this gang. They hit where yuh don't

expect, then hightail. They've got the whole county buffaloed, and murderin' old Jeff Shawn will pretty near cinch their hand.

"There ain't a rancher or business man in the county now who won't pay their price to be let alone. And all I can do is chase shadows while they get away with it."

Navajo Raine was silent for a moment, thoughtful. Then he asked:

"Who goes to see the ranchers when they're told to pay off?"

"Nobody," Bernay grated. "That's the devil of it! They're as slick as greased steer horns. Sometimes a masked man hits a rancher with a pay-off order. When I start watchin' the trails, they use the mail. When I put a check on the post-office, they turn to leavin' notes pinned to doors."

"What about collectin' the *dinero?*" Raine's voice was soft, utterly without emotion.

Sheriff Bernay swore wearily, and bitterness knifed his words.

"I tried that end of it once, and it was enough," he answered. "Jack Greaves was an old pard of mine, and he used to run a saddle-shop here. I asked him to tip me off when he was supposed to pay them crooks. He did, but them killers had guards out. They saw me watchin' where Greaves had left the money. I got a slug in my back, and was danged near killed. Jack Greaves wasn't so lucky. I'll never ask another man to give me that kind of a tip."

Navajo Raine pushed out of his chair, his expression thoughtful. Through the bar-laced front window, he could look out on Hangtree's broad street. The morning sun was an hour higher now, and heat was beginning to boil liquid waves out of the street's dust.

The Arizona Ranger studied the town with his slow glance. Where before there had been the roiling excitement of the holiday, there was now a sullen, ominous silence gripping the town. Good cheer had given way to flaring suspicions and bitterness and hatred. The women and children had disappeared, and the street had been taken over by restless knots of men.

The crowd which had formed in front of the funeral home where Jeff Shawn's body had been taken, was now breaking up and drifting toward the jail. Raine saw Judy Shawn leave the undertaker's office and turn into the hotel, followed by Red Brann. "Chuck" Macon and "Slim" Havers had stationed themselves across the street, and there was something deadly in their implacable stare toward the jail. A crowd was beginning to gather around them.

BERNAY moved around, slanted a glance through the window over the Ranger's shoulder. He cursed harshly.

"Raine," he demanded, "get back from that window. They'll wonder why I ain't locked yuh up if they see you."

"They've seen me," Raine said softly.

Bernay swore again, hotly. "Are yuh loco? Yuh're the same as askin' for 'em to go rope crazy. For all they know, yuh're the man who downed Jeff Shawn."

"They won't think that when yuh tell 'em who I am," Raine said quietly.

Sam Bernay didn't speak for a full minute, weighing the significance of the Ranger's statement. Then he broke out roughly:

"All right. So I tell 'em who yuh are! What does that get yuh, I want to know. Yuh'll cool the town off, but yuh'll be makin' a target of yoreself for them outlaws, whoever they are."

"That's what I want." There was no emotion in Navajo Raine's drawl, no expression in the flat planes of his dark face. He didn't pull his eyes away from the window and the heat-soaked street out there beyond.

He saw Judy Shawn and Red Brann come out of the hotel and move into the growing mob. Even from this distance, Raine could see the grief and strain in the girl's white face. The tall redhead halted in the middle of the crowd, and Slim Havers spoke through hard lips. Red Brann stiffened, jerked a temper-charged glance over his shoulder toward the jail.

Through the ominous rumble of voices, Raine heard the redhead's knife-sharp oath.

"By Judas, I'm findin' out why he's still loose!"

Navajo Raine turned away from the window coolly, but his words came quick and hard.

"Brann is comin' and the crowd will follow him. We're meetin' 'em at the

door, Bernay, and yuh're tellin' 'em who I am. Savvy?"

"When I tell 'em that I'll be the same as drivin' nails in yore coffin," the sheriff said shortly. "Whoever them outlaws are, like I said, they'll be gunnin' for yuh from then on."

Raine's lips widened in an icy smile. "And I aim to help 'em get in the mood," he said grimly. "That's the only chance I can see of spookin' 'em out in the open. I'm tellin' this crowd that Jeff Shawn wasn't dead when I dragged him out of his burnin' ranchhouse. I've a hunch the killers didn't check the slug they put in him. They figgered the fire would finish him if their slug didn't. So they won't know whether Shawn was alive long enough to name 'em, or not."

"Yuh're goin' to make 'em think he talked?" Sam Bernay snapped in surprise.

Navajo Raine nodded.

"Scare a smart killer, and sometimes he'll turn fool. It's a chance."

CHAPTER IV

The Dead Accuse

WHEN Red Brann strode up at the head of the crowd, Navajo Raine was standing in the door of the jail office. Tense silence rubbed out the harsh murmuring of the townsmen and punchers.

The redhead halted on the plank walk, his hand close to his gun, his eyes measuring the Ranger in a hating stare. Slim Havers and Chuck Macon stood on either side of Brann, sternly waiting.

Raine grinned coolly. "Something on yore mind, Red?"

Rage flooded darkly in Brann's rugged face.

"Yeah," he grated. "You!"

Then the redhead snapped an accusingly hot glance toward the sheriff at Raine's side. "Bernay," he demanded, "what kind of a double game are you playin'? Yuh brought this jasper here to be locked up for mebbe murderin' Jeff Shawn, then let him prowl around yore office like he's a long-lost brother. I'm givin' it to yuh straight, Sheriff. Yuh ain't caught anybody since this killer gang started, and bein' friendly with this gobbler don't help yore case any. Folks are beginnin' to think mebbe yuh're workin' with them outlaws."

"Sometimes folks make danged fools of theirselves by thinkin' things," Sheriff Bernay drawled calmly. "And by talkin' without knowin' what they're waggin' their tongues about."

"Sheriff," a man's voice broke out angrily from the crowd, "we didn't come here to waste time. We want to know about you and this stranger."

"All yuh had to do is ask," Bernay answered. "This hombre here has never killed anybody who didn't need killin', and he didn't gun Jeff Shawn. Mebbe yuh've heard of Navajo Tom Raine, eh?"

Red Brann's eyes narrowed to pin points. "The Ranger?"

"This is him," Bernay drawled, and added with a trace of irony, "Red, you and Slim and Chuck shore picked a quick way to get beat up when yuh tangled with this man."

Silence was a blanket in the street. Navajo Raine lifted the flap of his shirt pocket, exposing the Ranger badge pinned there. All the while his eyes were moving, narrowed and cold, shifting from face to face. But he saw nothing to center his suspicions on any one man. The faces he studied in the crowd showed common expressions—surprise, doubt, baffled interest, embarrassment.

Without turning his head, Raine said to the sheriff.

"Can yuh name anybody missing here?"

"I'd name half the town and county if I did," Bernay growled. "Most of the folks are still runnin' their stores, and there's a bunch over at the rodeo grounds gettin' ready for the show."

Raine kept his narrowed eyes shifting over the crowd, and when he spoke he knew his words might soon mean his death.

"There's something you gents ought to know," he said tonelessly. "I came here to bust up this killer gang, and that's just what I aim to do. I hurried that gang when I busted in on 'em last night at Shawn's place. I didn't see their faces, but they made their mistake in not waitin' to make shore Jeff Shawn wasn't still alive and able to talk. It was a mistake that will mean the end

of that gang."

"Yuh know who they are?" Red Brann broke in harshly.

WAS that fear in Brann's tone? Suspicion came to Navajo Raine's mind.

"I'll have 'em settled with by sundown," he answered coldly.

He watched the crowd intently, but still saw nothing to betray anyone who might be an outlaw. What he did next was sheer bluff, calculated to throw fear into any guilty man present. He began pointing out men in the crowd at random, asking the sheriff for names.

"That's Jim Collins, feed store man," supplied the lawman.

Collins blanched. "I ain't done anything!" he protested sharply, as Raine's attention singled out another man.

"Yuh pointed out Matt Gray, who runs the livery stables," said Sam Bernay then.

Raine continued expressionlessly, fingering out men here and there at the edges of the crowd. A tall, smooth-faced man came next.

"He's Vick Webber, town lawyer," said Bernay, "and the two men by him are Hutch Torby and Cass Page, who run games in the Hi-Lo Saloon. Next is Link Evers, sort of a town handyman."

Still Raine saw no alarm, no expression of fear. He moved his finger to another man.

"That man is—"

But the sheriff got no further. The whole town seemed to shake to the roar of the explosion that came then. The noise of the blast crashed along the street, hit the hills around the town, came pounding back, shuddering the air.

Somewhere a woman screamed. A horse broke loose from a hitch-rail, stampeded wildly down the street. A man in the crowd cursed hoarsely.

"That came from the bank!"

Through the sudden hush as the echoes of the explosion faded, came the voice of the lawyer, Vick Webber, amused and mocking.

"I reckon that clears all of us here."

"Tom Kittle swore he wouldn't pay off to them outlaws!" a townsman bawled as the sharp silence was broken. "That's his bank they hit this time."

Even as Navajo Raine fought his way through the crowd, and broke into a run down the street, he saw a fog of gray-black smoke boiling through the shattered windows of the town bank.

The explosion had made a shambles of the bank's interior. The concussion had ripped the door from the huge safe, and fire had gutted the insides. The walls had been blackened by smoke, and plaster littered the walls.

Sheriff Bernay, who had pounded through the door just behind Navajo Raine, took one look at the wreckage, then hurled a brittle oath to the townsmen and punchers shoving at his back.

"Stay clear, you men!" he ordered. "All yuh'd do in here is tromp out any sign them outlaws mebbe left. Webber, take a couple men and block off this door."

Panic was beginning to sweep through the crowd.

"What about our *dinero* we had in that safe?" a puncher shouted wildly.

Navajo Raine turned on the crowd, his eyes cold and hard. One thing he did not want was a panic that would bring those men rushing into the building.

"If yore money is gone, it's gone, and you wouldn't be helpin' get it back by stampedin' in here," he told them in a grim voice. "At least yuh're alive, and that's more than I can say about the man who was in the cashier's cage."

RAINE'S quiet words did more to settle them than a gun could have done. Men stared in from the windows and doors, but not one tried to push inside. Raine turned and made his way carefully into the room, his eyes probing. Nowhere could he see a disturbed place in the thick layer of plaster dust. He added up this fact thoughtfully, as he worked closer to the body in the cashier's cage.

"The gang fused their blast so they could be somewheres else when the explosion went off," he decided.

Sheriff Bernay cursed. "That means yuh've still got every man in the county to pick from," he growled. A savage note of fury crept into his tone. Now it's old Bob Lanett been murdered! He was the bank cashier, and as fine a man as ever lived! By Judas, if I ever get my guns on that killer pack—"

There was a commotion in the crowd outside as Raine reached the sagging

gate of the cashier's cage. He turned and saw a tall, florid man with iron-gray hair and a grim mask of a face shouldering past Vick Webber.

"That's Tom Kittle, owner of the bank," offered the sheriff in a growl. He lifted his voice. "Come on in, Tom, but walk easy. We don't want any sign scuffed out."

Rage was in the banker's craggy face as he picked his way through the wreckage. His voice was indicative of his fury.

"I was in my room at the hotel, gettin' ready for the rodeo, when I heard the blast. I was afraid it was the bank. Those dirty, money-grabbin' sidewinders! I swore I wouldn't pay off to 'em, and this is what I get. Sheriff, what yuh doin' about this?"

"All I can," Sam Bernay said tightly.

"By thunder, it better be enough!" the banker raged. "It's time we stopped pussy-footin' around and had some action."

"Rawhidin' yore sheriff won't help any, Kittle," Navajo Raine drawled quietly. "I'm Raine, with the Rangers, sent up here to give Bernay a hand. There'll be plenty of action when the time comes."

But it was a hollow bluff, and Navajo Raine knew it. He had nothing yet to go on. The killers had struck again and had vanished, and he knew he had as yet made no more progress than had the sheriff. He felt the weight of the banker's scowl.

"Raine? Navajo Raine?" The Ranger nodded. Tom Kittle went on bluntly. "I've heard of yuh, and if yuh ain't as good as yore reputation, I'm callin' to the governor for help." He dropped his eyes to the body on the floor. "So it was old Bob they murdered this time!"

Navajo Raine said nothing more, turned away, and stooped to the body of the dead man. Bob Lanett must have been close to his seventieth year, he decided, and the man's age made his murder all the more brutal. His white hair was red with blood where something heavy had crashed against his head just behind his left ear. Plaster dust that had been dropped by the blast grayed his clothes, and the side of his face was visible.

The man's dead eyes seemed to be looking toward his outstretched hand. A pen was still in Lanett's ink-stained fingers, and the corner of a sheet of paper was turned up through the dust beside his bony hand.

Raine picked the paper up, shook off the dust, and the scrawled words penned on the sheet seemed to leap up and hit him between the eyes. Words from the dead—words that would mean death!

THERE was a cold, inexorable glint in Navajo Raine's eyes as he read them. Each word was less legible than the one written before, as though death had been wrapping itself around old Bob Lanett even as he scratched the words with the pen. Those words were:

Vick Webber, Hutch Torby, Cass Page,
Link Evers did thi—

Still holding the paper out of sight of the men behind him, Raine folded it slowly and palmed it. So old Bob Lanett had lived long enough to name the men who had murdered him!

It was an unexpected break of luck, and yet Navajo Raine did not hurry. The long training of the Indians who had befriended him had taught him that care and patience sometimes accomplished more than speed. He squatted there on his heels, only his eyes moving. There was that cruel, crushing blow that had killed the old cashier to be considered. There was the curious twist of the dead man's outstretched arm. Raine reached down and picked up the arm. It sagged limply—too limply. The Ranger eased it back to the floor, his eyes suddenly hard and cold with a thought that had come.

He straightened, turned away from the body, the folded paper still palmed in his hand. Sam Bernay's eyes were on him, sharp and probing.

"Yuh find anything?"

"Plenty," Raine said.

He pushed past the sheriff and the banker, strode to the flame-gutted safe. The papers inside the heavy safe were charred to ashes, and only a few ledgers had escaped complete destruction. There were a few scattered coins, blackened by fire and smoke. Raine turned to the banker.

"How much cash was in here?" he asked quietly.

"It'll take time to find out," Tom Kittle said stiffly. "At least twenty thousand in paper money—prizes for the rodeo and stock show—but it don't take

good eyes to see all of it was burned up."

Raine slid the folded paper into his pocket, then dropped his hands in a habit of caution, loosened his guns in their holsters. His dark face was like carved stone when he spoke.

"I reckon it's time I got me some killers," he said softly.

CHAPTER V

Killers Die Hard

TENSION was like an electric current running the length of Hangtree's dusty street, squeezing out all sound. The threat of violence was piling up around Navajo Raine until the crowd felt it, and it tightened nerves, put a strain in faces. Those men knew that danger was close, but they did not know where to look for it.

The Arizona Ranger backed away with the heat of the morning sun punishing his shoulders. There was something inexorable in the lines of his face, the set, implacable mask of a manhunter who knew his life or death hung in the balance during the next few minutes.

The townsmen and punchers were strung out a dozen yards in front of him, tense and waiting. Once they knew where his challenge would fall, they would be quick to dive for the sidelines. Raine shifted his eyes over them, centered out the Arrow J redhead.

"Brann!" he called out flatly.

Red Brann stiffened, a tinge of white ringing his wide lips.

"Look here, Raine, if yuh're tryin' to tie this killing on me—" he began hotly.

"You love Judy Shawn, don't yuh?" Navajo Raine broke in levelly.

"Shore, but—"

"Yuh want to settle with the men who murdered her father?"

"Yuh're danged right," Brann said, and swore fervently.

"I can use help," Raine said.

The big redhead neither answered nor hesitated. He turned, and led Judy Shawn to Slim Havers and Chuck Macon.

"Look after her," he said.

Fear was in the girl's eyes, but she did not try to stop him. He wheeled around, and moved across the open space to the Ranger's side.

"You name 'em," he growled.

Raine's sliding glance picked up a look of doubt in Sheriff Bernay's square face. Raine knew what was running through the lawman's mind—that the Ranger was forcing a show-down on sheer bluff, and that it had little chance of succeeding.

That same thought was in Navajo Raine's mind as he singled out the four men near the end of the crowd's line. But there was nothing undecided in his tone when he spoke.

"You gents standing near Webber, Torby, Page, and Evers better move clear," he warned coolly. "They're yore killers."

It was like a bombshell exploding on the street. Townsmen and punchers began shoving wildly for the sidelines. The four killers stood rooted in silence. There was a hollow smile of mockery on Vick Webber's thin mouth. Hutch Torby's face was turning dark with anger. Cass Page was poised, dangerously ready. Link Evers was showing a trace of panic.

"Raine," Vick Webber drawled calmly, "Yuh're explodin' yore reputation for bein' smart. Yuh'd better backtrack yore talk before yuh land in trouble. Yuh're barkin' at the wrong men."

Raine smiled icily. "In my pocket," he said, "is a piece of paper I took out of old Bob Lanett's dead hand. It's got the names of you four on it, says yuh're the killers who done for him."

WEBBER flinched as though cut by a whip. Surprise hit him, then a black flood of rage wiped all trace of sardonic amusement from his face. That was what Raine had counted on, startling the man off balance, and now Raine knew beyond all possible doubt that that paper was not an attempt to frame an innocent man, but a message pointing out a guilty killer.

"Yuh're loco!" Vick Webber yelled. "We didn't do that bank robbin' and killin'! We couldn't have! We were in the crowd in front of the jail when the explosion went off."

Navajo Raine began crowding his bluff home.

"That blast was timed to go off minutes after the charge was set," he said grimly.

He saw fear etch deeper into Link Evers' narrow face. Evers, he decided, would be the first to crack, and he crowded all his threat against that man.

"Yuh'll hang for what yuh've done," he pressed grimly, and paused to let his words sink in.

"Dang it, Boss," Link Evers began, "this finishes—"

"Shut up!" Webber flared. He fastened hot eyes on the Ranger. "Yuh're forgettin' I'm a lawyer. I'll have yuh in court for this, cuss yuh!"

"It's me who will have you," Raine said bleakly. "It won't be hard to compare some of yore extortion notes with paper and writin' in yore office. I'll get my evidence, all right, if I need any more. Yuh're forgettin' about old Jeff Shawn, that mebbe he lived long enough to name names—"

That was as far as he got. Link Evers' nerve broke in a flare of violence, and he carried the other three killers along with him, shattering their control with his yell of hatred.

"Yuh'll never live to see me hang!"

Link Evers' gun came up in a blue blur of speed. But as fast as the killer was, his draw failed to match Navajo Raine's gun magic. Raine more than made up for the suddenness of Evers' move.

Their weapons flashed up as one, and there was not the space of a heart-beat between their shots. Raine felt the whip of the killer's close-passing slug even as his own bullet crashed home. Evers went down as though his legs had been chopped out from under him.

But there were other killer guns on the street, and what followed was a chaos that never was completely clear in Navajo Raine's mind.

He heard lead slap flesh close beside him, knew vaguely that Sheriff Bernay had been cut down. But then Bernay was on his feet again, throwing his slugs with savage fury.

Raine heard Judy Shawn's cry of fear, one that was echoed by Red Brann's challenging shout.

"Take it, polecats!"

Cass Page went sheering off in a lopsided run, only to trip and sprawl in a loose heap. Hutch Torby was sinking to the street as though sucked down by the gunsmoke curling around his middle.

Raine saw his next two slugs drive thin gouts of dust from Vick Webber's shirt, staining the cloth with widening blots of red. But Webber never stopped shooting until his guns were empty, his convulsive muscles forcing roaring slugs into the street at his feet.

THEN abruptly the shooting stopped, and only Webber was on his feet, swaying slightly, rocking from heel to toe. He seemed to have to fight his last words out.

"Tarnation with Evers!" he croaked. "You had no proof! If Evers hadn't cracked yuh'd had nothin'—"

He was dead when he hit the street.

Navajo Raine turned to find Sheriff Bernay standing beside him on wide-planted legs, gripping an arm that was red with blood. But there was nothing weak in the lawman's grim growl.

"I didn't think yuh'd ever stretch that bluff out far enough. So they done that bank robbin' and killin' off right under my nose!"

Raine shook his head slightly. "It wasn't Webber's gang who did that," he said softly.

He turned then, singling one man out of the crowd in front of the bank. He seated his gun lightly in its pouch, waited through a long moment of hush.

"Yuh still think yuh'll get away with it, Kittle?" he asked then, grimly.

Tom Kittle flinched as though he had been struck a blow. He opened his mouth to speak, then clamped it into a hard trap. Raine's voice came, bleakly quiet.

"I reckon we'll find the bank's money somewhere in yore room, Kittle. My hunch is nothin' but cut-up paper was burned when yore safe was blasted. That's how yuh planned it, wasn't it—rob yore own bank and throw the blame on Webber's outlaws?"

Still the banker refused to talk, holding his silence as though he hoped that something in that would save him.

"What I can't understand is how yuh figgered it was Webber's gang workin' the county," the Ranger went on wearily. "Yuh musta paid 'em off with marked money once, then watched who brought it in to deposit. Yuh're smart, Kittle, but yuh made a few little mistakes that will hang yuh. Yuh poured oil inside

yore safe so's it would burn out when the explosion went off, but I'd have a hard time to prove that.

"What put me onto yuh was how old Bob Lanett was murdered. He wouldn't let anybody but a man used to workin' around him get close enough to bust in the side of his head. But yore big mistake was makin' it look like he'd written the names of Webber's gang on that paper. He was dead when he hit the floor, and yuh didn't notice that his fall busted his arm and he couldn't have written anything. When a man gets as old as Bob Lanett his bones break easy, Kittle—just as easy as we'll have provin' yuh murdered him!"

The banker made a swift try for his gun, but he never got it clear of the holster under his coat. He forgot about the two Arrow J punchers standing beside the girl not far from him.

They moved with a single thought, swift and certain. Slim Havers reached the banker first, clamping a hard hand around Kittle's wrist. Chuck Macon threw the punch, and the banker never knew what hit him.

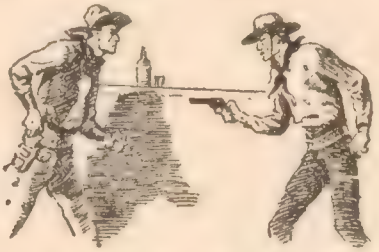
Macon turned, grinning and rubbing his knuckles.

"When me and Slim hit a man he stays hit," he chuckled, "unless he's a jasper like Navajo Raine."

"Chuck's motto is—the bigger they come, the harder he falls," Red Brann broke in drily. "Meanin' it's Chuck that usually goes down."

Navajo Raine eyed the redhead with a glint of humor in his eyes. He said nothing, but Red Brann understood. And for a man who was afraid of nothing, the redhead lost no time getting to Judy Shawn's side. She had that look in her eye, and Red Brann knew where bravery ended and discretion began.

"The fearless male," Raine drawled, and there was a trace of envy in his tone.



A Desert Lighthouse Guides Gold-laden Stages in the Night—and Leads the Arizona Ranger to a Gun Showdown in

BEACON OF DOOM

By JACKSON COLE

Another Exciting Navajo Raine Yarn—Coming Next Issue!

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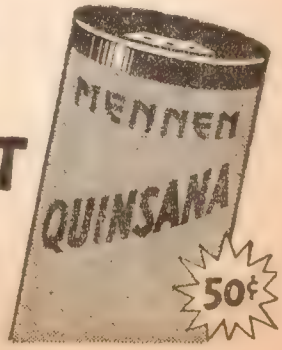
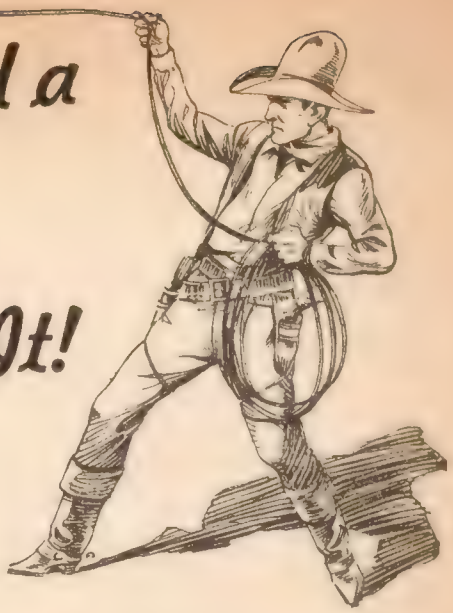


The Cowboy Had a WORD for It!

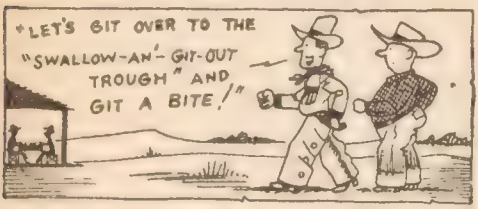


By CHUCK STANLEY

Another Friendly Powwow on the Subject of Cowtown Conversation!

OUR ranch owner and his tenderfoot turn their buckboard through the gates into the road leading up to the large ranchhouse on the hill. Our "Arbuckle" has been told he is going to work for "Aunt Sally" and he is wondering what sort of a lady she is.

"What do you think of the spread?" the ranch owner asks, as he sweeps his hand in a broad arc to cover the grazing land, the cattle, the hills, water and buildings on his range. The tenderfoot immediately decides that "Spread" is the cowboy's name for the ranch and all its belongings. He's right, but there are



also a number of other names which the waddy uses to describe his home on the range.

"It's quite a ranch," the tenderfoot replies. Besides describing his ranch as a "spread," the cowboy also spoke of it as a "layout" and an "outfit." This designation included not only the land and the buildings, but also the cowboys, the horse wrangler, the cattle, and anything else connected with it. It was also spoken of as "the brand" or "the iron." This, of course, referred to the cattle brand which marked the beef from a particular ranch, and gave the ranch its name.

Aunt Sally's Grub Pile

As they drove along, a loud clanging filled the air, and the horses pulling the "buckboard" immediately perked up their ears, increased their gait and headed for the house a mile or more away.

"What's that?" asked the tenderfoot, "a fire?"

"Oh, no," laughed the rancher, "that's Aunt Sally's grub pile. We'd better go along, or we'll be late."

Arriving at the ranch, the tenderfoot discovered that everyone was busily engaged in a long building, with shutters open to the breeze, and beyond the openings he saw the bobbing heads of the cowboys as they dove into the food.

Leaving the horses and buckboard in the hands of a wrangler, the rancher and his new "hand" washed up at the watering trough, and then strolled into the "cook-shack." Most ranches might have

Here's Your Chance to Learn Some More Western Lingo!

one or two kinds of cook-shack. The first of these was an extension to the ranch-house where the cook prepared the meals. The second type was the one we introduce here, where the kitchen and dining room were combined.

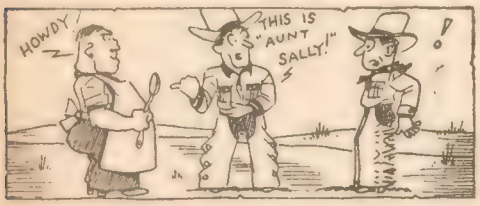
Besides being called the "cook-shack," the "buckaroos" also spoke of their eating place as the "feed-bag," the "feed-trough," the "nose-bag," the "mess-house," the "grub-house" or more colorfully, "the swallow-an'-git-out trough."

Our tenderfoot brushed back his hair, and beat off some of the dust he had accumulated while driving out from town. After all, he was going to meet Aunt Sally. Inside, the cowboys greeted the ranch owner, and looked over the newcomer with mixed feelings. Some of them saw him as a candidate for another "leggings case" while others greeted him with shouts and laughter.

The ranch owner walked the tenderfoot up to the ranch cook and said soberly:

"This is Aunt Sally."

Our "Arbuckle" discovered then that instead of being a woman of either pert or plump feminine beauty, "Aunt Sally" was a grizzled oldster of about fifty-five, who had seen his best riding days, and who, in a flour-bag apron, and a checkered shirt, was now tending the wants of the "hands."



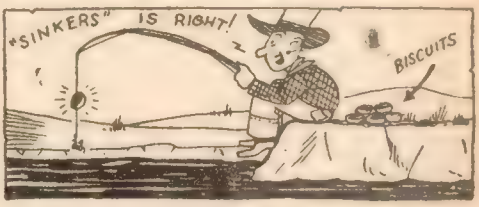
The newcomer and the ranch owner joined the others. The "Arbuckle" wondered whether they would make fun of him because of his mistake regarding Aunt Sally. For the most part cowboys took such mistakes with good-humored grace.

Our embryo cowboy also discovered that "Aunt Sally" was one of the politer designations for the ranch cook. Other less dignified names included "belly-robber," "belly-cheater," "biscuit-shooter," "biscuit - roller," "sour - dough," "dough-wrangler," and "dinero." Two other names, one of which was brought from the East by such tenderfeet as our friend, were "sheffi" and *"cocinero."*

"Sheffi" was the cowboy's variation of the word chef. "Cocinero" was used along the Mexican Border, being the Spanish-Mexican word for cook. But even here, the boy who spent his time prodding cattle around, added his own fluent alternates to the Spanish. He shortened the word from "cocinero" to "coosie" or "coosey."

Cowboy Food

Seated at the table, the pilgrim was more or less on his own, since the ranch owner had other matters to attend to at the house. If the cowboys had not been friendly and understanding, our new-



comer might well have starved to death, for even the food on the table had its own cowboy names.

During the course of the meal, he discovered that the biscuits were variously referred to as "sour-doughs," "dough-gods," "sinkers" and "hot rocks." If the ranch happened to be close to the Rio Grande in Texas, New Mexico or Arizona, our pilgrim would have met up with "sopapillas" which were a type of biscuit made by frying squares of dough in deep fat until they puffed up. These were also known as "bunuelos" or "little buns."

But no cowboy can fortify himself for a hard day on the ranch with biscuits alone, and the Easterner soon learned that he had his choice between "sow bosom and cackleberries" and "son-of-a-gun stew."

At first hearing, neither one of these sounded very appetizing, but he soon discovered that the first was salt pork and eggs. When the cowboys happened to be on the range, and eating from the "chuck-wagon" this meal was given a new name. It was called "chuck-wagon chicken."

The stew had a more colorful make-up. It was created from the brains, sweetbreads and other choice portions of a newly-slaughtered calf. Another name

for this meat dish was "District Attorney."

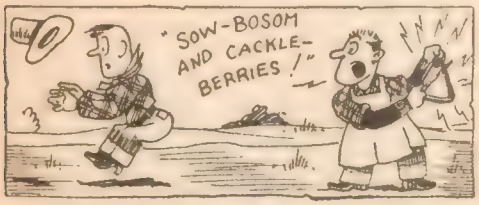
After the main portion of the meal had been stowed away, the "dough-gods" were used to clean up the gravy, or "sop," as it was called. Now and then calls went up and down the table for "Charlie Taylor" to help out with the "dough-gods." Our ranch rookie decided that Charlie must be one of the more popular cowboys, but discovered soon afterward that this was the cowboy's substitute for butter. It was made by mixing bacon grease with syrup or sorghum molasses.

The molasses itself also supplied the range riders with a rare delicacy when mixed with their biscuits or bread, and the "shorthorn" from the East learned that this was called "blackstrap molasses" because of the fact that the jug in which it was usually carried on the chuck wagon was attached to a hook or brace by a black strap run through the jug handle.

Other names for this cowboy substitute for jam were "lick" and "long sweetening."

For Dessert—"Calf Slobbers"

With his meal stowed away, the novice cowpoke was curious about the dessert that might be expected on the frontier, and just how this would be described by his new colleagues. The first item trot-



ted in by the cook was lemon meringue pie, but no one called it that. To the buckaroos it was simply "calf slobbers."

Then there came along a big bowl of rice pudding, and this was immediately dubbed "John Chinaman." The tenderfoot was about to ask for this when someone demanded "the horse-thief special" and received the same rice pudding.

The "John Chinaman" designation was applied to this dessert, because the Chinese cooks in the West were perhaps the best creators of this delicacy. The "horse-thief special" idea was applied when it was discovered that the mixture of rice and raisins took a very short time to make, and a horse thief might be able to cook and eat it while still staying a few jumps ahead of the sheriff.

One of the cowboys, watching the way the tenderfoot was packing away his meal, said:

"You're about ready for a dose of *chimaja.*"

Upon asking for an explanation the new cook's helper discovered that *"chimaja,"* was the wild celery plant, and was used for making the familiar celery tonic and other medicinal concoctions of the Southwest. The "Arbuckle" took the hint and eased off on his eating.

Mexican Influence

Had he been down along the Border area, our tenderfoot would have found quite a different menu, with a definitely Mexican cast to it. His meal would have been known as a *"comida,"* the Spanish word from the word *comer,* meaning to eat. The staple foods might have included ordinary *carne* or meat; *carne seco* or dried meat; or even the popular *chili-con-carne,* meaning beef and red beans.

His fork and spoon for the occasion might well have been the Mexican pancakes known as *tortillas.* These are flat cakes made of specially prepared coarse meal and flour. They get their name from the Spanish word *tortil,* which means "to twist." *Tortillas* must be twisted into a scooped shape to hold beans and other delicacies while eating.

Advice to a Tenderfoot

With the meal concluded on the ranch, and introductions completed, the ranch owner took our tenderfoot up to the house, and there had him sign the payroll and listen to some valuable advice.

"Forget you're a tenderfoot," he said. "You'll find the waddies are a bunch of fine fellows. They'll rag you for a few days, but at the same time they'll expect you to pull your weight on the ranch. Take it in good spirit, and you'll get along."

The rookie range-rider nodded agreeably. Then the rancher said:

"You got in here with no war-bag, and not much of an outfit, so I'm going to stake you to one from the supplies here. We'll deduct it from your pay."

"That'll be swell," agreed the tenderfoot.

He discovered that his "mail-order stuff" would probably do all right for Sundays, but for working around the ranch, the clothing supplied by the ranchman was more practical for a number of reasons.

This outfit consisted of a rain-coat or slicker, a shirt, a hat, a neck scarf, a scarf holder, a vest, wrist cuffs, gloves, chaps, boots and "levis." The ranch owner explained that each one of the items had its own purpose, not only as an article of warmth or dress, but also as a protection against the hazards of ranching, branding, horse-herding, etc.

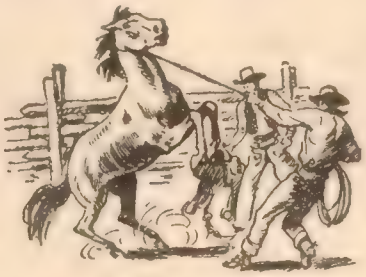
The novice cowpuncher could understand the simple names of all the items that had been given to him except his "levis." These were heavy blue pants which would fit into his boots, and they were made of an overall cloth. The rancher smiled at the pilgrim's query and said:

"They're named after Levi Strauss out in California, the fellow who makes them. You'll find other things that take their names from their maker, like a 'John B.' or a 'Stetson' for your sombrero; or 'Justin' for your boots."

The tenderfoot nodded his understanding, gathered up the clothing and blankets that the rancher had issued to him, and headed for the bunkhouse. There the foreman would show him his corner of the place, and then he would settle himself for his first night on the ranch.

In keeping with the suggestion of the ranch owner, he hoped that he would wake up in the morning a full-fledged cowhand; or at least capable cook's assistant. But we all know that our range rookie has a lot to learn, and we're going to continue his schooling in our next issue when he is asked to acquaint himself with a *chaleco,* and nearly strangles himself because he doesn't know how to use a *chonco.*

Maybe, you'd be in the same fix. But join us next time, and we'll not only learn why the cowboy had a word for it, but just what that word was.



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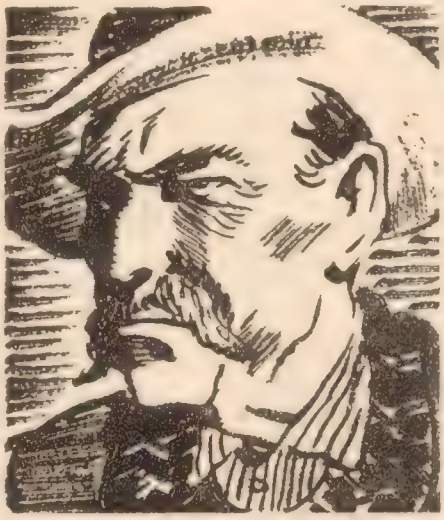
SPURS OF DEATH

By SCOTT CARLETON

A Grizzled Old Ranch Cook Does a Murderer Up Brown When Death Stalks the Leaning M!

OLD Buck Garson dropped down on the bench slow and tired-like. Behind him the open door of the cook shack was like a black mouth yawning at the star-lighted night. The ranch cook filled and lighted his battered old brier pipe, taking his time about it as a man will when he hasn't much else to do.



BUCK GARSON

Lights gleamed through the windows of the bunkhouse down yonder among the trees. Dimly Garson could hear the voices of the men as they talked, a sound that seemed muffled and far away. A good outfit, this Leaning M crew, though they ate like a pack of wolves, Garson thought. It sure kept a man hustling to be certain they were fed right good.

The cook sat there watching the man who had just come out of the back door of the ranchhouse and was walking slowly down the hill toward him. The man loomed tall against the sky, his spurs jingling musically as he walked.

"Nice night, Buck," Tom Allen said stopping beside the bench. There was a brittle note in his young voice like he was feeling a little edgy. "Nice night for murder!"

"Somethin' troubling yuh, Tom?" Garson asked.

He got to thinking how his game leg seemed to ache a little more than usual when he got to talking to a young and husky waddy like Tom Allen. Sometimes it was right hard to forget there had been a time when he had been a tophand just like this tall jigger standing beside him.

"Had a run-in with the Old Man," Allen said as he seated himself on the bench beside the old cook. "Jed Madden shore was feelin' mighty proddy. Told me he didn't figger I was doin' a man's job with the outfit. Unless I done better I could be lookin' for another outfit to join."

"Don't mean nothin'," said Garson. "Jed just gets hot under the collar sometimes when he's a-worryin'. The Boss has got a lot on his mind."

Tom Allen didn't say anything.

GARSON sat there thinking about Jed Madden. You learn a heap about a man when you've worked for him close on to twenty years. The way Buck Garson figured they just didn't make any finer men than the Boss when you knew him right well.

Of course Madden did have a lot on his mind. Take that five thousand dollars in cash the owner of the Leaning M was keeping up there at the house right now in order to have it handy for that cattle deal Madden aimed to put through tomorrow. That was enough money lying around to make a man worry.

The cook glanced up as he heard hoofbeats. A rider appeared from over toward the south forty and headed for the corral. Allen moved restlessly and looked in that direction as he heard the corral gate creak like it always did.

"Who just rode in?" he asked like he

really wasn't right much interested.

"Joe Hall, I reckon," said Garson. "He was the only one who didn't show up for supper." The cook frowned. "There's a hombre who shore uses his spurs right, regardless. Ain't a hoss in his string that ain't marked by them rowels."

"I know." Allen nodded. "But I never was one to tell a man how to ride." The young waddy yawned and stood up. "Reckon I'll turn in. Yuh aim to sit awhile, Buck?"

"Reckon so." Garson found his pipe had gone out and struck a match. He sat there as Tom Allen walked away.

The cook watched Joe Hall coming from the corral with his saddle over his shoulder. Garson kept listening for something as he watched Hall but the cook just couldn't quite figger what it was he missed. He saw Hall leave his saddle in the harness shed and then head for the bunkhouse.

Buck Garson just sat there smoking his pipe and thinking about things like a man will. Finally he decided that it might do him good to go up to the ranchhouse and talk to the Boss.

Jed Madden always made him feel he was right welcome up at the house—and they would sit on the wide porch and get to chinning about old times. Besides Garson had a feeling that Madden might be needing him now.

Garson walked up the hill and circled around the ranchhouse figuring he might find Madden sitting on the porch, like the owner of the Leaning M so often did these nights. Madden did a lot of sitting that way in the dark since his wife died, five years ago. Garson figured it was a shame the old man didn't have any children.

There was no one on the porch, and the cook found the shadows seemed right lonely. He went in through the open door, along the hall and turned into Madden's office.

"Jed!" Garson's voice sounded strange to his own ears. "Who done this to yuh, Jed!"

The old cook stood there just staring at the gray-haired man who was slumped back in the chair at the battered old desk. There was blood on Jed Madden's forehead, and his eyes were closed forever. The blow that had killed him had been a swift and brutal one.

Garson looked at the long-barreled old Colt lying close to Madden's body on the desk. Seemed like all the ranchowner would have needed to do was reach out and grab up that gun. But it looked like he never even tried to touch it.

"Somebody he knew well enough to trust," muttered Garson, and his words became mocking whispers in the silence. "He was facing the killer when he was struck."

He glanced at the old iron safe standing behind the desk. The door was open and the old cook did not doubt that the five thousand dollars Jed Madden had been keeping there was gone. Buck Garson figured that greed was a mighty low reason for killing a man.

THE cook wasn't one to get excited when he had a job to do. Now that the first shock had passed, he had just one idea—to get the killer. He took a last look around the ranch office, then locked the door from the outside and hobbled down to the bunkhouse.

He told the men what had happened and sent one of them riding to town for the sheriff. Chances were that Johnny Doyle wouldn't get back with the Law before morning, for it was a twenty-mile ride to town and of course another twenty back again to the ranch.

It made Buck Garson feel good to see how the rest of the outfit listened to what he had to say and obeyed him. Even if he didn't have much authority it sure looked like the boys respected his judgment. Even the foreman seemed to figure that Garson had something on his mind when he asked just what work the men had been given during the day.

"Then yuh didn't have any special jobs over on the south forty?" Garson finally asked the foreman. "Ain't that so, Hap?"

"Not that I recollect," said Hap Jennings. "But yuh say yuh figger the Old Man was killed by somebody he knew. Why that might have been any of us, Buck." The foreman looked mighty hard at the old cook. "Including you!"

"That's right." Garson nodded. "Including me!"

Of course Jennings and some of the rest of the outfit had to go up to the house and look at the body. Garson went along with them and opened the door of the ranch office with the key. He made mighty sure that the men didn't touch anything though.

Along about sun-up Tom Allen saddled his horse and rode away from the spread, heading north across the range. Garson had talked to him just before getting breakfast ready for the outfit. . . .

Buck Garson was the only one who knew that Jed Madden didn't have any kin-folks left. According to Madden's will the Leaning M went to Buck Garson when the owner died. Buck figured it might be better if the rest of the outfit didn't know that until the murderer was caught.

Just as Garson called the men for breakfast Johnny Doyle rode in with Sheriff Harvey and a couple of deputies. The lawmen knew their jobs and were not inclined to bluster.

They asked questions, and it was Joe Hall who spoke up.

"Mebbe yuh better ask the cook," Hall said. "He seems to know all about it. Reckon yuh even can point out the killer, Garson."

"Might be," said Garson quietly.

He went over and talked to Tom Allen who had just come into the room. The young waddy nodded solemnly.

"Maybe Allen is the jasper yuh're lookin' for, Sheriff," said Hall. "Allen and the boss had a quarrel about something last night."

"But Allen didn't kill Madden," said Garson, looking at Hall. "You did that, Hall."

"Yuh're crazy," snapped Hall. "I wasn't even here. I rode in from the south forty after it happened."

"Shore yuh did," said Garson. "And yuh weren't wearin' yore spurs—which wasn't natural for a man that handles hosses the way you do. Reckon yuh took them off so yuh could sneak into the house and steal the five thousand dollars the Boss had there.

"Madden must have caught yuh—and because he knew yuh he let yuh get close enough to kill him. Then yuh rode away, circled around and returned like yuh was comin' from the south forty."

"Just talk," said Hall. "Yuh can't prove that I had a thing to do with it, Garson."

"Yes I can!" Garson said. "I sent Allen out to the south forty first thing this mornin'. Since the foreman didn't have any of the outfit workin' that section yesterday the only fresh tracks were those left by yore hoss last night. Allen's right good at readin' sign."

"Good enough to follow them tracks," Tom Allen said, "and find the money where Hall hid it beneath a rock until things kinda blew over!" He pulled a dirt-stained roll of bills out of his pocket and handed it to the sheriff. "Here's the money, Sheriff."

GARSON was standing there by the cook shack holding a big frying pan in his hand. Joe Hall cursed and grabbed for his gun, looking a heap like a wolf that had been caught in a trap. Before he could use his Colt the cook banged him over the head with the frying pan and knocked him senseless.

"I owed him that for killin' the boss," Garson said. He looked at the unconscious man and sighed. "Shore am glad he sorta proved his guilt by goin' for his gun thataway. Shucks, he might have claimed that Tom Allen here did the killin' and was framin' him by producin' the money."

"I thought of that angle," said Sheriff Harvey. "But there ain't no doubt that Joe Hall done it now." The lawman smiled at the cook. "Jed told me yesterday that yuh inherited the ranch if he died, Garson."

"He'll make a right good boss," said Tom Allen. "But I'll shore miss his cookin'."

"Ain't no law that says a man can't cook for his own outfit if he wants," said Buck Garson, looking pleased. "At least I aim to try!"

When Outlaws and Indians Conspire to Wipe Out An Army Post, Alamo Paige Smashes Their Plans in

RAIDERS OF THE WILDERNESS

Next Issue's PONY EXPRESS Novelet by Reeve Walker

Nelson dropped his gun as swift paralysis struck his muscles

ONLY ONE RODE OUT

By CHUCK MARTIN

Young Gene Creighton Rubs Out More Than a Nickname When Sure-thing Nelson Tries Some Fancy Bushwhacking!

A GAUNT roan pony came loping down the trail which led to the entrance of Hell's Kitchen. Gene Creighton was riding the roan, standing up in the stirrups, his lean frame turned almost backward, as he scanned the back trail toward Cartola.

Usually good-natured, the twenty-year-old cowboy was evidently holding his mad under tight wraps. His thin face was like a block of granite, nostrils flaring wide, tawny eyes flaming between slitted lids.

Creighton saw a dust cloud coming toward the Kitchen; a second dust plume spurred him to a peculiar activity. He rode the roan back into a scrub-oak pocket, making a ground-tie with trailing reins as he slid from the saddle. Racing back to the trail, the long-legged cowboy made a nest in the brush by turning like a dog making a bed in high grass.

As he settled down to wait, he told himself that it wasn't his fight. He never had liked "Sure-thing" Nelson, owner of the Triangle N. "Square Johnny" Creighton, Gene's brother, had picked

the fight which gave Sure-thing Nelson the right to name the time and place.

Which was why Gene Creighton was waiting. Nelson had named Hell's Kitchen, which had only one entrance; had called the time for sundown. Square Johnny could take care of himself in a gun ruckus, but Gene shook his head doubtfully.

Square Johnny was ten years older than Gene; had been like a father to him. He was fast with a gun, and could put his shots where he called them. They owned the little Box C together, slept in the same blankets; ate each other's cooking. A man would always get a square deal from Johnny Creighton. Most everyone in Cartola liked Johnny.

IT WAS different with Sure-thing Nelson who always played his cards close to his vest. Men whispered that Nelson would rather cheat for credit than play an honest hand for cash. He'd float a horse's teeth and sell him for a five-year-old. And then there were the five notches on Nelson's gun.

Each notch represented a man Nelson had shot to death; four had been killed back in Hell's Kitchen. It had always been the same in every case. Two men rode in, but only one rode out. That man had always been Sure-thing Nelson.

Gene settled in his brush nest and watched the dust clouds grow larger. He had begged Square Johnny to let him take the fight to Nelson. He had wanted to tell the big so-and-so about their Box C cattle they had found on Triangle N range with their brand blotted out, and Nelson's new brand alongside.

Square Johnny had shaken his sandy head; said he was the boss of the Box C for another year, until Gene was old enough to vote. Said they should have known better than to sell Nelson twenty head of steers. They had found fifty head on Nelson's range, and Nelson had a bill of sale for fifty head, written with an old tally pencil. Most Texans never asked for a paper, but Sure-thing Nelson was not like most Texans.

The wind blew the dust away as the first man on horseback passed Gene's hiding place. The rider was a big barn-shouldered man with longhorn mustachios, mean little brown eyes, and a brace of .45 Peacemaker Colt six-shooters. Sure-thing Nelson stood six-four in his high-heeled boots; weighed two hundred and twenty pounds. About thirty-five years old, fast on the shoot; crooked as a mule's hind leg.

Gene Creighton had his gun in hand, sights lined on the big cattleman. He sighed and holstered the weapon just as a second rider choused down the brushy cattle trail. The second man was Gene's older brother. Square Johnny Creighton.

Square Johnny was built like a rawhide whip, and twice as tough. Gene was an even six feet; Square Johnny was an inch taller. Wide shoulders tapering down to lean hips. Long lean legs that had the power of steel springs when clamped on a tough green bronc. He wore faded denim overalls tucked down in his run-down boots; a shell-studded belt held his holstered long-barreled Texas pistol.

Square Johnny looked like Gene, except for the lines in his bronzed face. He had accepted responsibility early; had stayed too long with the mean Texas horses he broke out and sold to the neighboring cattlemen. A cowboy from boots to Stetson, earning every dollar he made.

Gene wanted to shout out for Square Johnny to drag his rope; to make Sure-thing come out in the open to burn his powder. But he remained silent, watched Johnny ride through the runty brush which screened the one entrance to Hell's Kitchen.

The minutes went by with only the monotonous droning of the deer flies to break the stillness. When Gene could stand it no longer, he started for Hell's Kitchen on the double quick.

Two shots blasted the hush of twilight before Gene could reach the opening. He dove into the brush like a scared rabbit, wondering what had been so different about those two closely spaced shots.

The clop of hooves warned him. Gene made himself thin in his brush pocket. The hoof-beats grew louder, and then—Sure-thing Nelson rode out!

Gene Creighton watched the big man ride away without a backward glance. Unshed tears burned in Creighton's eyes; a little moan parted his lips as he ran through the entrance to Hell's Kitchen. Something made him drag his

spurs; he darted to the side just as another rider came loping from the far side of the little valley.

Gene's eyes narrowed as he recognized "Rifle" Farley. Farley was Nelson's *segundo,* and the best shot with a thirty gun in Deaf Smith County. Creighton recognized the gun under Farley's left saddle-fender, and his young face grew hard with understanding.

NOW he knew why there had been a difference in the two shots. Smoke grime covered the barrel of Farley's thirty gun; Square Johnny's six-shooter was still in leather. As Farley reached for Johnny's gun, Gene Creighton stepped out and barked savagely:

"Don't touch Square Johnny's gun, yuh sneakin' killer. Now I know why Sure-thing never lost a fight. Yuh hid up there and blasted the victim with that saddle gun, after which yore boss triggered a shot into the air. Then yuh sneak down and shoot the dead man's gun to make it look good. Get ready to die, yuh murdering son!"

"Hold yore fire, Gene," a deep voice murmured weakly. "His thirty slug got me high. Give him a chance for his taw!"

Gene Creighton gasped, started to look away from Farley; stopped the move abruptly. Farley's hand was streaking for his gun; it froze on the lip of his holster.

"Square Johnny," Gene said softly. "Can yuh hold out?"

"I'm bleedin' some, but I was goin' to kill this stingaree if he reached for my gun," Johnny murmured. "Holster yore hog-leg, kid. I'll give the old go-ahead. No gent can do his best fightin' when he's wrong, which you ain't."

Gene Creighton smiled grimly as he holstered his gun. He knew the hang and balance of it; had worked the handle over to suit his own grip. Square Johnny was still the boss; day orders had been given.

"Yuh both get a square shake," Square Johnny said quietly. "I'll count to three. No cheatin', Farley," and Square Johnny's speech gained speed. *"One, two, three!"*

Rifle Farley was the kind of man who would always jump the gun, firing on the count of two. The count blurred together so rapidly that both men were caught flat-footed. Both slapped at the same time, but Farley had lost his advantage.

Gene Creighton dug for his gun and triggered a shot as his muzzle cleared leather. Farley got his shot away just as Gene's slug tore into his fist, knocked the heavy .45 spinning, and mangled the killer's gun-hand. Farley went to his knees, snarling like a trapped coyote.

"Whyn't yuh kill me?" he screamed. "I'll never trigger another gun."

"That's the general idea," Gene Creighton said quietly, "and then, there's the law." He spoke like a man who has rid himself of a heavy burden. "Just set a spell until I do what I can for Square Johnny."

"I ain't much on the set," Farley answered, his teeth clenched tight against the pain of his mangled hand. "I'm bound to bleed out unless I get this hand fixed up; if that don't kill me, Sure-thing Nelson will."

Gene Creighton turned slowly with cold fury in his slitted tawny eyes. His gun slipped to his hand as he stared impersonally at Farley, like a man will do who has a distasteful job to perform, but has made up his mind to get it over with as quickly as possible.

"A man can't go far or do much with *two* hands shot up," he said quietly. "He couldn't even get on his horse."

Rifle Farley was cradling his right hand against his chest with his left. The fight drained from him as the injured hand began to throb. If that pain was doubled . . . ? The wounded man sighed tremulously as he sank down on his boot-heels.

Gene Creighton was kneeling beside his brother. Square Johnny had lost consciousness, his face pale and drawn from loss of blood, and the strain of holding out until Rifle Farley had got his due. A spreading red blotch stained Johnny's gray flannel shirt above the left breast. Square Johnny must have dropped into a crouch just as Farley had pressed the trigger of his .30-30 gun.

Gene unbuttoned the flannel shirt, stared at the deep hole where the high-powered bullet had entered. He gripped Square Johnny by the shoulders, raised the unconscious man. The long slug had passed all the way through; only the skin held it prisoner.

THE law? Deputy-sheriff Rad Scott was all the law there was in the little cowtown of Cartola. Scott was a good officer; would arrest any man who made a gun-play in town. Outside of Cartola was different. If a man wore a six-shooter, he was posting a sign that he could take care of himself. Murders were different, but a shoot-out between hotheads was their own business. The winner could claim self defense.

Gene Creighton tore a piece of cloth from his brother's undershirt, made a plug which he pushed deep into the wound to stop the flow of blood. Getting Square Johnny back to the Box C would be difficult, but the cowboy breed is tough. But what about Rifle Farley?

Creighton turned to study the bushwhacker who was gripping the wrist of his wounded hand. Then he stretched to his feet, walked over to Farley's grazing horse. He cut a long saddle-string for a tourniquet and after making a loop in one end, he spoke gruffly to the wounded man.

"Hold yore hand up and I'll tie off to keep yuh from bleedin' out. Yuh haven't got anything the doctor can't cure. We're ridin' back to the Box C for the night."

Rifle Farley did as he was told without argument. A man could go some place where he wasn't known, and he had lost the desire to die. After the tourniquet was tightly in place, Gene motioned to Farley's horse with a jerk of his sandy head.

A cowboy grips the saddle-horn with his left hand when mounting; a boost with Gene's shoulder put Farley in the saddle. Cutting another saddle-string, Creighton made a loop and bound Farley's left hand to the saddle-horn.

Getting Square Johnny on his horse required all of Gene's strength, but he managed to lift the wounded man to the saddle. Then he mounted up behind, tied the reins of Farley's horse to his saddle-horn, and rode slowly out of Hell's Kitchen.

He picked up his own horse as he rode through the scrub-oak trail. The roan would follow without leading, would head straight for the Box C barn for his measure of grain. Four miles to the little ranch where the horses stopped at the tie-rail in front of a neat adobe house.

Gene Creighton swung down and eased his brother from the saddle. He tied the horse with one hand as he glanced at Rifle Farley and noticed the look of disappointment on the drygulcher's mean face.

Men who work cattle learn to read signs without speaking. Rifle Farley had counted on trying a break with the horses loose; he sighed as he slumped further down into his saddle.

Creighton carried his brother into the front room, laid him on a cow-skin couch and lighted the coal-oil lamp. Walking into the yard, he stripped the gear from his two horses, put the saddles up so that the skirts would catch the air, and turned to Farley.

"Welcome to the Box C—again," he told Farley, as he pulled the slip-knot which bound Farley's left hand to the saddle-horn. "Slide down and get in the house."

He spoke in a toneless voice but Farley obeyed without hesitation. Gene followed him, closed the door. He indicated a heavy chair with a careless wave of his left hand.

"I'll put a bandage on that busted flipper to keep the dirt out," he said quietly. "But first I'll hobble yuh to that bunk post just in case yuh get ideas."

Once more Farley obeyed without speaking. It wasn't his turn to talk while Gene Creighton held all the high cards. A peculiar expression flitted briefly across his mean face; was gone instantly as Gene spoke.

"Sure-thing won't come here, Farley. He will ride out to Hell's Kitchen come daylight, but yuh won't be hidin' in the brush to copper his bet."

Gene smiled grimly as an expression of panic brought fine beads of cold sweat to Farley's brow. Turning on his heel, he walked to a small cabinet hanging on the wall, took bottles and bandages and returned to Square Johnny.

SIMPLE cow-camp surgery was all Gene knew. A solution of permanganate would prevent infection; old Doc Conklin could finish the job after he had cut the skin to remove the .30-30 slug. That one long bullet was all the evidence the law would need to put Rifle Farley out of circulation for a long time.

Square Johnny groaned as Gene finished his bandages. His gray eyes

opened wide, stared around the familiar room; then he smiled at his kid brother.

"Help me sit up, Gene," he whispered. "I've been hurt worse than this and still done me a day's work."

Gene pulled Square Johnny up against the headboard of the couch and propped him with pillows. He reached into the back of his belt and produced Farley's six-shooter which he handed to Johnny.

"Don't fire yore own gun," Gene warned. "I want that for evidence. I'll make some strong coffee and throw some vittles together. This Triangle N cowhand is honin' to tell us about those rustled steers, and he better give up head."

Farley grunted and lowered his eyes.

Gene busied himself in the little kitchen, warming up a kettle of beef stew, brewing strong cowboy coffee, without too much water. He cut slabs of salt-rising bread, the kind that sticks to a man's ribs. Then, carrying two plates of food to the front room, he helped Square Johnny until his brother snarled at him.

"I still got my right arm," he declared with a shamed grin at his loss of temper. "Get outside your own grub, and then feed that helpless bushwhacker yonder."

"After he talks some with his mouth wide open," Gene answered carelessly as he attacked his own food. "This hot coffee sure hits the spot. Smells good, too."

Rifle Farley scowled as the aroma filled the room. He watched the two brothers wolf their food, licked his thin lips, and broke his silence.

"What you hombres want to know?"

"Not much," Gene said, without turning around. "We gave a bill of sale for twenty head of Box C steers. Who changed the paper to make it read fifty head?"

"He got me into this; now let him get himself out," Farley muttered angrily. "Sure-thing Nelson changed that paper. He knew I couldn't talk because he's got somethin' on me."

"Three-four killin's, mebbe," Square Johnny suggested, and his voice was stronger. "I hate a drygulchin' skunk, but dead men don't do much talkin'. Do they, Gene?"

"I'm not a killer," Gene murmured, knowing that Square Johnny had figured out the plan he had in mind.

"If yuh ain't a killer, don't go down to Hell's Kitchen," Farley warned hoarsely. "Sure-thing is double fast, and he don't throw off his shots. Yuh won't shoot a gun out of Nelson's hand!"

"Yuh heard him, Gene," Square Johnny said quietly. "When two men ride into Hell's Kitchen for a shoot-out, only one of them rides out, and Sure-thing Nelson plays for keeps. Give Farley his grub so we can make up our sleep."

Gene Creighton went to bed in the upper bunk, after making Square Johnny comfortable. Rifle Farley was sprawled in the lower bunk, but none of the three did any sleeping. Daybreak would come shortly after four o'clock; sunrise was as good as sundown when a man had to die.

Creighton had made up his mind during the sleepless hours of the long night. Square Johnny would know what to do in the event that he, Gene, turned out to be another notch on Sure-thing Nelson's gun. The thirty bullet would be evidence against both Farley and Nelson, and for further proof, Square Johnny's six-shooter had not been fired.

Deputy Rad Scott would be riding down to get evidence for his report and Scott would stop at the Box C to investigate.

"Better make some coffee," Square Johnny suggested. "Nothin' like strong coffee to steady a man's hand."

"I don't need coffee, and you and Farley can wait until I get back," Gene growled. "I don't want a light showin', and the smoke would be a give-away when Nelson rides down the trail."

GENE washed in a tin basin outside the house, saddled the gaunt roan, and came back to the house to see if Johnny wanted anything. Square Johnny said he was all right, gripped Gene's hand firmly; wished his kid brother luck. Farley added a bit of his own for purely selfish reasons.

"Don't take any chances, cowboy. Smoke him down on sight, or he'll do the honors for yuh. Pay no mind to his *left* hand when he waves it around to make yuh careless. Good huntin'!"

Gene Creighton said good-by, pulled his old Stetson low, stomped out through the kitchen door. If his name was on one of Nelson's bullets, a man could only die one time.

The roan humped his back a few times to get rid of the kinks, taking his spur-

whipping as part of the day's work. Gene's blood was tingling as he headed the roan down the trail which led to Hell's Kitchen. He was thinking that a killer always returns to the scene of his crime, and Sure-thing Nelson never missed out.

Two of them would ride down the one-way trail; the Devil would claim the one who stayed in the Kitchen.

Big Bert Bowie had stayed there after an argument with Nelson. So had Harry Curtis and Sam Boster. Good cattlemen all, who had objected out loud when their bills of sale had been altered. The papers had proved ownership; the homicides had been declared committed in self defense.

No one had thought of looking for the bullets which had killed the three who had challenged Sure-thing Nelson to a show-down.

Creighton loped down the narrow trail and into the brush-fringed entrance to Hell's Kitchen. He rode off to the side after throwing a bed-roll on the ground where his brother had been wounded. Square Johnny's old hat rested near the bed-roll; he wouldn't be needing it for a while.

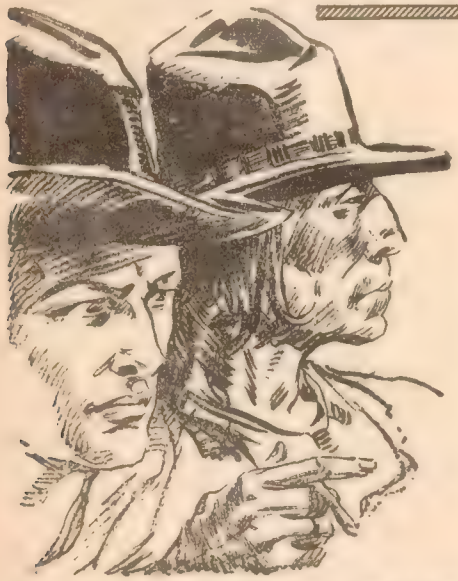
He tied his roan well back in a thicket, checked his six-shooter which he had cleaned in the dark while lying in the top bunk. The hammer was resting on an empty; a full load would slide under the spiked prong when the old single-action was cocked—for self defense.

Creighton smiled grimly as the first gray fingers of dawn began groping in the east. Sure-thing Nelson would try to kill him; Nelson would also be counting on Rifle Farley to be on the job. He had learned that lesson when Bert Bowie's brother had taken up where big Bert had laid 'em down.

He came to his feet as the clop of hoofs sounded down the narrow trail. That swish of brush would mean that Nelson was riding into the entrance, not knowing that he was riding a one-way trail.

Sure-thing Nelson was straddling a big bay gelding. He rode into the Kitchen at a trot, headed for the bed-roll as he scanned the valley for opposition. His hand was on his gun as he swung to the ground. Now the light was better to show the deception.

"Don't draw, Nelson," Gene Creighton said quietly. "Yuh're a flat-footed rus-



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tler, and I can prove it. Square Johnny was shot with a thirty-thirty, which puts a noose around your neck!"

Sure-thing dropped his hand away from his holster. His head jerked around to listen; then he turned to face Creighton who had walked into the clear. Nelson was six-feet-four in his high-heeled boots; two hundred and twenty pounds of target.

"I expected yuh, yearlin'," Nelson said slowly, in his deep rumbling voice. "Yuh're a liar about the thirty bullet; my gun is a forty-five Colt."

"Square Johnny was only shot one time," Creighton said quietly. "I'm goin' to hold yuh right here until the law rides down."

"Yuh moved the corpse," Nelson said thoughtfully. "There will be a corpse for the law. How yuh want it?"

"Just a fair shake, if yuh won't surrender," Creighton answered quietly. "And I mean a square shake. Rifle Farley ain't hidin' back in the brush the way yuh figgered. Yuh're on yore own, Sure-thing."

NELSON straightened slowly; he would have been easy prey for a man who wasn't sure of himself, and wanted an advantage. Creighton made a derisive sound with his lips; it brought Sure-thing Nelson back to realities with a jerk.

"Is Farley dead?" he asked.

"What do you think?" Creighton parried. "I always hit where I'm lookin'. One more chance to surrender!"

Nelson raised his right hand and stroked his longhorn mustaches. His brown eyes glittered under hooded lids. His left hand began to make little jabbing moves while his right fell to his side, with his thumb hooked in his shell-studded belt.

"So yuh killed my old friend, Rifle Farley. Yuh know too much, but dead men don't talk."

Sure-thing Nelson struck for his gun without warning. He dipped his knees a trifle to shed the holster as his muzzle spilled from leather with thumb notching back the hammer.

Gene Creighton had anticipated the treachery. His right hand blurred in the early dawn as he made his pass and a swift side-step at the same time. He felt the tug of Nelson's slug at his vest as he threw down for a point shot. The law of old Judge Colt did not stipulate that a man had to give his opponent two free tries.

Sure-thing Nelson was thumbing back against the recoil of his bucking gun; working for a follow-up. Orange flame stabbed at him as Creighton slowly squeezed off a shot.

Gene Creighton felt that peculiar thud which comes to the hand of a gunfighter when his slug has found its mark. He leaned slightly against the recoil as his tawny eyes watched a man dying on his feet.

Sure-thing Nelson triggered his second shot into the air as swift paralysis struck his muscles, like heat lightning. He swayed back, came forward; his knees buckled to pitch him forward across the old bed-roll.

"Don't shoot, Gene," a stern voice broke the stillness. "Deputy Rad Scott talking, and I saw the whole thing. Yuh got him center?"

"I had it to do," Gene Creighton admitted frankly. "He was faster than me."

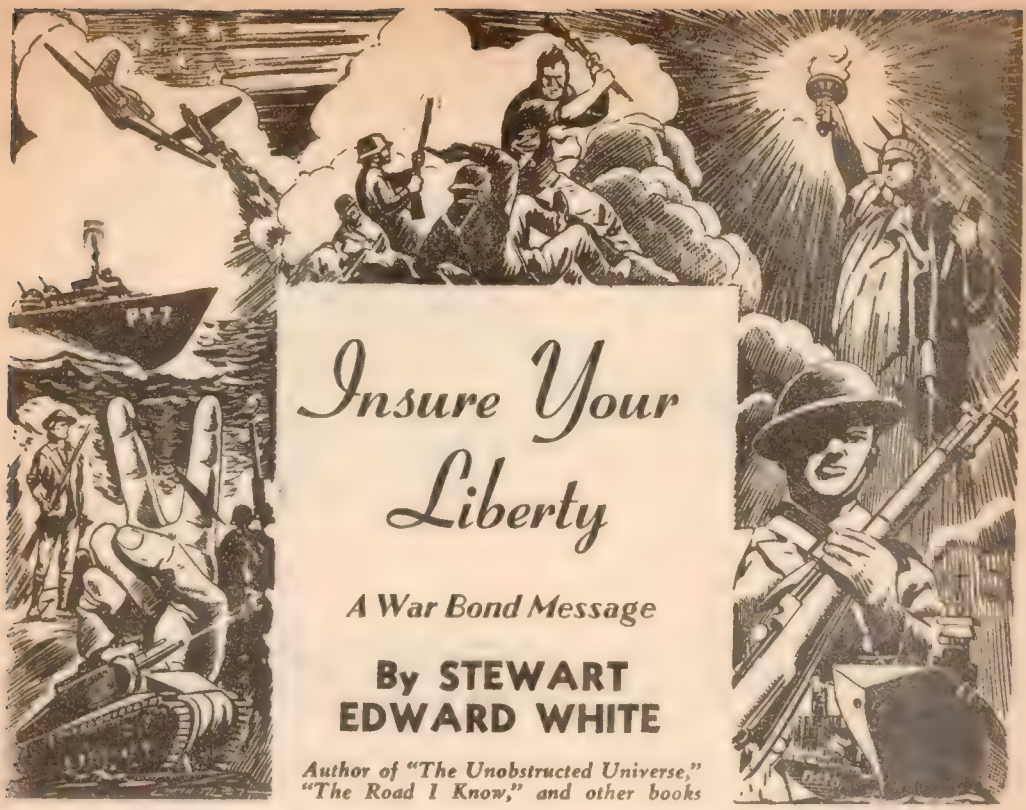
"Get goin', cowboy," the deputy said quietly. "The deceased met his death from a bullet fired by a man who shot in self-defense. I'm stayin' back here a while. I stopped at the Box C; the law will take care of Rifle Farley."

"Adios," Creighton said slowly, and mounted the gaunt roan.

A show-down battle had been fought to a finish in Hell's Kitchen. Two gunfighters had ridden through the entrance. Only one rode out!

Next Issue's Headliners

SPURS FROM BOOTHILL, *a Smashing Action Novelet by* WALKER A. TOMPKINS—RAIDERS OF THE WILDERNESS, *a Pony Express Novelet by* REEVE WALKER—THE BLACKLEG HERD, *an Exciting Novelet by* C. WILLIAM HARRISON—*Plus a Navajo Raine Story and Many Others!*



Insure Your Liberty

A War Bond Message

By STEWART EDWARD WHITE

Author of "The Unobstructed Universe," "The Road I Know," and other books

PEOPLE fight to get near bargain counters. There is a sale going on now. Why aren't you there? I think you would be if you understood. It is absolutely unique in that the wares for sale are of the greatest value: and that after a time you will get your money back!

One of the things on the counter is liberty.

"Liberty! Liberty!" sneered a fascist-minded man to a friend of mine, "You're always talking about it, but what *is* it?"

"The fact that you and I can talk this way openly to each other," replied my friend.

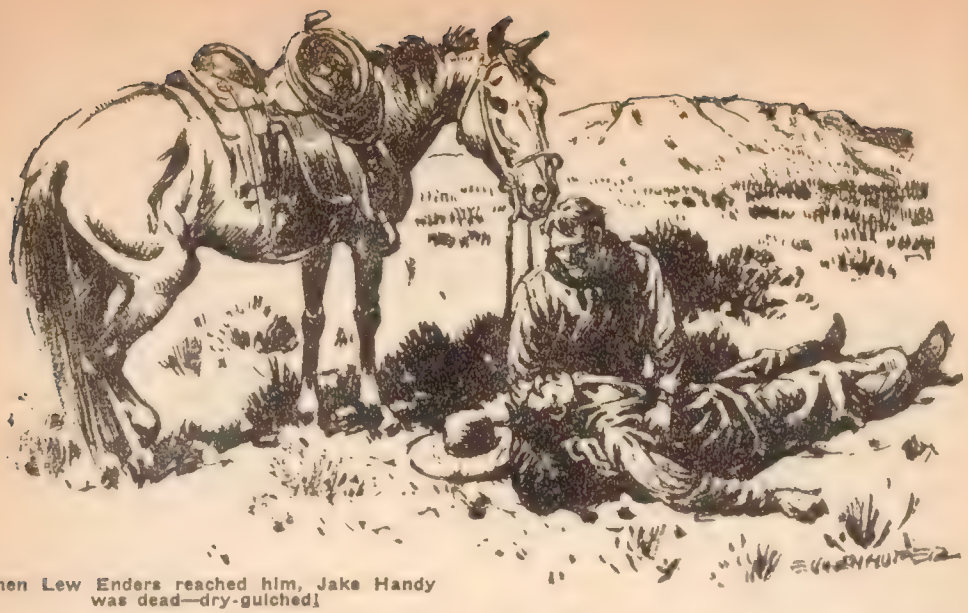
Imagine yourself deprived of this right; and the privilege of choosing your jobs; and of going where you please and when you please; and of attending what church you wish—or of not going to church; of reading whatever appeals to you; of conducting your own affairs and having a voice in the conduct of affairs in general. And imagine finding these things for sale, on that bargain counter. Wouldn't you be there? And wouldn't you be willing to pay your whole cash balance, if you had to, in order to get them back?

I think so. I think a Frenchman or a Hollander or a Norseman would jump at such a chance, and be willing to start life all over again, from scratch—but free.

Well, nobody wants your whole cash balance; and as yet not all of these things have left your possession. But some of them have and all of them will unless you will pay to keep them. Insure them while they are cheap, on the bargain counter. You can do it now with money, and later get your purchase price refunded. Or you can postpone it until your money has lost its value, and then the only price will be a very high one in anguish and blood.

That is why I say that war bonds and stamps are a good buy. I don't mean merely a good and safe financial investment, though they are just that; but an investment in the future of stability and freedom that has never before in the world's history been offered at so cheap a price.

A WAR BOND MESSAGE FOR ALL AMERICANS!



When Lew Enders reached him, Jake Handy was dead—dry-gulched!

BAIT FOR A BUSHWHACKER

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

Lew Enders Battles His Way to a Detour from Owlhoot Trail—and He's Almost Roped into a Drygulching Frame!

LEW ENDERS, tall and lean-hipped, his hand held tensely close to his thonged-down gun butt, bent over and slipped the missive under the door of the sheriff's office while the lawman was making his nightly check-up along the main street of Sunbrite. Then Lew moved away swiftly, stealing out of the desert-edge cowtown as stealthily as he had entered.

The words on the note kept running through his mind. He had written:

Dear Sheriff:

Jake Handy's body is out at Lonely Wells. I buried it shaller and put a pile of rocks over it to keep the buzzards and coyotes and other varmints off of it.

A Friend.

P.S. Jake was dry-gulched. I ain't sure yet, but I think I know who done it.

P.P.S. It wasn't me.

It wasn't the way blond, curly-headed Enders would have wanted it. Lew would have preferred walking right up to peppery little Matt Higby and telling him just what he had seen of the bushwhacking that had downed Jake Handy out on the sand at Lonely Wells. But Higby was a sheriff who listened to law rather than reason and a hunted man, Lew reflected bitterly, had his own skin to look out for.

Slipping into the shadow of a mesquite grove beyond town, Lew whistled three times. Presently a horse moved out of the darkness and nuzzled him. Lew swung into the saddle.

"Leastways we done what we could for pore Jake," he told his horse, speaking as if the intelligent animal could understand every word that was said.

The trim, sturdy-legged paint carried Lew at a fast, mile-eating trot out past the short grass spreads scattered around Sunbrite and into the open desert beyond their unpainted, ramshackle ranchhouses. He made only a faint-hearted attempt to turn in at the gateway to the deserted Bar X. Lew reined him gently back on the trail.

"There's somethin' about home that grips a feller, don't it?" said Lew qui-

etly. "You and me both, hoss. Even if it's only a shake-roofed shack on a piece of starvation range."

The paint tossed its head as if in agreement. Reaching forward Lew patted the creature's sleek neck. "Mebbe we'll be back some day. And mebbe not. They say the owlhoot trail's a hard road." Lew squared his shoulders. "But doggone it, I don't intend to swing for somethin' I didn't do."

His grim mood subsiding momentarily, Lew chuckled aloud. "Anyhow pickin' Higby up by his waistline and droppin' the lil' coot in the hoss trough when he come out to arrest us didn't do our case no immediate good. It plumb ruin't his pants and his dignity."

AS HORSE and rider cut across the cactus-studded desert in the eerie light of a rising yellow moon, they headed for a second time in less than twenty-four hours for the black lava badlands that lay beyond the high ridge that denoted the edge of Crowsfoot mesa. A man could hide out for weeks, and even months, in the tortured region of jumbled rocks, pinnacles and narrow passageways that marked the badlands.

The desert was empty. Lew liked that. It gave him a chance to think, and his mind kept reverting to one man, Lige Tapper. Lige was new to Sunbrite valley, and ruthless. He seemed determined to gobble up all the small shrub-grass spreads into one big range of his own. A breeder range, he said, from which cattle would be shipped to the Consolidated's feeder lots further east for filling out and market fattening. The Consolidated was the county's biggest outfit. Lige had openly hinted that the giant cattle company, controlled by eastern capital, was behind him.

Yet as far as Lew was concerned past events had been hectic pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that didn't fit together.

"I could figure Tapper framin' me 'cause I wouldn't sell and neither would Sam Husted. But I can't prove it," he told the paint. "If he was the one drygulched Sam and made it look like I done it, it would put him in the way of gettin' two properties for one bullet. Everybody knows me and Sam was always arguin' over fence lines. But Jake Handy! Shucks, Jake'd already told it around Sunbrite he was goin' to sell."

Lew was almost positive the hulking form he had seen earlier along the rimrock of Crowsfoot mesa above the spring at Lonely Wells had been Lige Tapper's. It had the same bulk and sawed-off bluntness.

Every detail of the bushwhack was etched in Enders' brain. Jake apparently stopping for a drink beside the spring at the base of the mesa's clifflike wall. The sudden glint of gun steel from the mesa top. A puff of smoke. And down below, Jake keeling over as if he had been felled by a club. It was brutal, cold-blooded murder.

After the shot the drygulcher spotting Lew for the first time far out on the desert floor had jumped to his feet, mounted his horse and galloped out of sight behind the mesa rim. Though he knew the range was too great for accurate shooting with the short-barrelled carbine he carried in his saddle scabbard, Lew had thrown two or three futile shots at the murderer before he disappeared.

When Lew reached the spring he found Jake Handy . . . dead. Jake's horse, spooked by the gunfire had loped off, headed no doubt for home. Lew made no attempt to catch it, but forced his own mount up the steep, zig-zag trail that led to the top of the mesa. He found no trace of the drygulcher so he had returned to the scene of the murder.

On the dodge himself, Enders' first thought had been that this new killing was none of his business. Self-preservation urged him to push on to the badlands. There was nothing he could do for Jake.

Yet in his heart Lew knew this wasn't so. He had never known Handy very well, but the man had been a neighbor. You didn't leave a neighbor's body lying out in the desert for the buzzards to despoil no matter what the reason.

Lew figured he'd have to take his chances on Matt Higby. The temporary grave he made for the murdered man wasn't deep. He dug it out of the soft sand with his bare hands. It was tedious, finger tearing work and it took time.

Precious hours passed. Lew had looked up frequently from his grisly job, expecting the sheriff to ride over the horizon at any minute. More than once he had turned around suddenly, a creepy feeling that he was being watched

tingling along his spine. But he had seen no one. He attributed the feeling to jittery nerves.

The fact that Matt failed to show up even when the makeshift grave was finished had not settled Lew's problem. He almost wished he had ridden on in the first place.

"If that lawman don't stumble on Handy," he told the paint, "he's got to be notified somehow. An' I'd sure hate to think it's up to us to do it. Mebbe some rider . . ."

But the desert had never been emptier of any sign of a traveler. Only a plaintive cactus wren chirped in the oppressive stillness and a lanky road-runner darted over the sand intent on its own prey.

Lew had ridden to the mesa top. Squatting on his haunches, Indian fashion, he had rolled a quirly and tried to figure out his next move. He had done all that was possible, he told himself as he peered out across the desert. But he couldn't make this alibi sufficient for his throbbing conscience.

BY THE time the lengthening afternoon shadows deepened and the westing sun dropped flame-red into the maw of the badlands behind the mesa, Lew had determined on the move he had to make. It had taken real courage to come to his decision. Not the sort of gun-battle bravery that a man had when he swapped lead with an enemy, or stood up and slugged it out in a toe to toe fist fight. This thing was different.

Lew Enders was wanted by the law for murder. If there was one fear in Lew's life, it was his livid horror of prison. The sort of horror an outdoors man has of being confined behind stone walls and prison bars for endless years. The desperation of that fear had been the motive that had impelled him to lash out at Matt Higby earlier in the day when the sheriff had come to arrest him at the Bar X. Matt had expected no violence from the usually peaceful Enders and had been caught completely off his guard.

Before darkness fell Lew, still squatting on the mesa rim, had written his letter to the sheriff, telling of Handy's murder.

"We gotta go back to Sunbrite, hoss," he had said, "and take our chances."

Now his missive slipped under the sheriff's door, he was free to flee once more as he retraced his way over a desert bathed in lemon-colored moonglow. Nearing the spring at Lonely Wells his eyes turned towards the grave he had dug earlier in the day. A startled exclamation escaped his lips.

Reining the paint to a sudden halt, he swung quickly out of the saddle. A few steps took him over to the grave, and he stared foolishly into the empty hole. Jake Handy's body was gone.

"That's goin' to make me out an awful liar to Matt Higby," he muttered.

Then he saw tracks, twin wavering lines made in the sand by Jake's high-heeled boots where the dead man had been dragged back towards a gash in the mesa wall. Lew found the body behind a waist-high boulder. It lay there crumpled like a sack of oats.

Even before he stooped down for a closer look Lew realized the man's pockets had been rifled. They were turned inside out. Contents the thief had not wanted, a pocket knife, a couple of loose padlock keys, an empty wallet, a few nails, and a piece of string lay scattered on the ground.

Lew failed to hear the movement behind him that was stealthy as the slither of a snake. Then a boot crunched on gravel and Lew turned, his fingers tightening around the handle of his .45.

"I'd hold that draw, Enders," a voice rasped. "Yuh'd never make it."

Lew found himself staring into the muzzle of a six-gun. He let his hand fall away from his hip.

"Yuh've been a fool, a soft-hearted fool," he told himself bitterly. "Yuh let yore conscience trap yuh. If yuh'd ridden straight on in the first place yuh would have been safe in the badlands. But no, yuh had to stop and bury Jake Handy. What did it get yuh? A noose around yore neck, or prison walls the rest of yore pore misguided life."

Lew looked up. He fully expected to see Matt Higby behind the gun. Instead his eyes met and held those of Lige Tapper. A thin smile creased Tapper's hog-jowled, piggy face as he jerked his left thumb towards the badge that glittered in the moonlight on his open vest.

Lige Tapper a deputy sheriff! Puzzlement knitted Lew Enders' sweat damp brows.

"Surprised, ain't yuh?" grinned Lige. "Grab some sky 'fore I let this hammer drop."

Tapper's gun was cocked. Lew read killer lust in the man's cold black eyes and slavering, puffy lips. He raised his arms, slowly.

Tapper moved up to Lew and took his gun. He started to throw it away, saw what a fine weapon it was, and on second thought thrust it into the waistband of his trousers.

"When yuh acted like a desperado this mornin'," declared Lige, "yuh sure cinched yore guilt o' killin' Sam Husted. Higby made deputies outa' some of us citizens an' put the heat on." He leered triumphantly at his prisoner. "I'm one of 'em. Orders are to bring yuh back —dead or alive. Start walkin' towards the spring."

Lew glanced down at Handy's body, wondering if Lige was going to leave it there. Tapper walked over and kicked at it viciously.

"The dirty, blackmailin' son," he snarled.

Lew knew then he had been right. It was Lige he had seen on the mesa top. A wild hope that was all too quickly extinguished sprang up in his breast. Perhaps he could make a deal.

"I wondered why yuh drygulched Jake," he said. "Saw yuh from the desert."

"He had it comin' to him," replied Lige callously. "Had to get my money back. Paid him a thousand dollars to button his lip an' ride outa the country. The fool thought I'd let him keep it."

TAPPER prodded Lew forward with his gun muzzle. "I'd of got the money when I downed him if yuh hadn't butted in an' played grave-digger." The heavy man's smile was gross and ugly. "Turned out all right though . . . for me." He chuckled at some evil secret of his own. "They gotta get up early to outsmart Lige Tapper," he bragged.

Lew didn't like the man's cocksure attitude. "Takin' me into town is goin' to be risky, ain't it, Lige?" he said. "Suppose I talked."

"Yuh'd be the first dead man that ever did," replied Tapper. "Because when yuh reach Sunbrite yuh're goin' to be

[*Turn page*]

WHY GOD PERMITS WAR!

Why does God permit war? Why does He permit cruelty, injustice, pain, starvation, sickness and death?

Thirty years ago, in Forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young Englishman named Edwin J. Dingle found the answers to these questions. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange Power that Knowledge gives.

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In his own case, he was brought back to splendid health. He acquired wealth, too, as well as world-wide professional recognition. Thirty years ago, he was sick as a man could be and live. Once his coffin was bought. Years of almost continuous tropical fevers, broken bones, near blindness, privation and danger had made a human wreck of him, physically and mentally.

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Within ten years, he was able to retire to this country with a fortune. He had been honored by fellowships in the World's leading Geographical Societies, for his work as a geographer. And today, 30 years later, he is still so athletic, capable of so much work, so young in appearance, it is hard to believe he has lived so long.

As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send the readers of this notice a 9,000-word treatise. It is free. For your free copy, send your name and address to the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. F-337, Los Angeles, Calif. Write promptly.

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across yore saddle, not in it."

Lew knew Lige meant it. The man was cold-blooded as a rattler and twice as dangerous. Most western killers, ruthless as they were, had their own code and stuck by it. But not the human vultures like Tapper who preyed only on the weak and unsuspecting. Tapper was a bloodthirsty fiend. Gunning a helpless man in the back would mean nothing to him.

Lew was surprised the man had forewarned him of his purpose. Yet in a way he was glad Tapper had done so. That is if a man can be called glad at all to know that somewhere within the next few minutes or miles he is slated to be shot down like a wild beast caught in a trap.

It removed hope. But it also removed all doubt as to his intended fate. A man in that unenviable position, reflected Lew, could afford to take a desperate chance if the opportunity offered itself.

Tense as a coiled spring, Lew feigned a casualness he was far from feeling. Keep a braggart talking, he believed, and sooner or later he'd relax his guard.

Sure that his prisoner would not be alive long enough to repeat anything that was said, Tapper's tongue wagged with gloating looseness.

"Reckon Higby an' the citizens in Sunbrite'll make me out sort of a hero," declared Lige expansively. "It'll take some of the bad light off my name you little jack-rabbit ranchers in the valley been tryin' to give it, when I pack back the killer of two men, and save 'em trial costs at the same time."

"Two!"

"Sure. The way I'll tell it yuh gunned down Handy without a chance on account of he was witness to yore drygulchin' of Sam Husted. It fits together like two parts of a Chinese laundry ticket."

Lew knew bitterly that Lige was right. The story would sound logical.

Noting the bleakness in Lew's face, Tapper elaborated. "I'll make it sound like yuh must of broke away from the sheriff to kill Jake, that yuh didn't dare face a court trial while Jake was alive to testify against yuh. Too bad yuh ain't goin' to be there to hear it, Lew. It's airtight."

They were close to the spring now. Tapper chuckled. "There's one thing yuh could do for me 'fore yuh die," he went on. "Make out a bill of sale for the Bar X spread. It sets right in between Husted's and Handy's places. I'd sure like to have it."

"You go to the devil," snapped Lew.

Lige shrugged. "I'll get it anyhow," he said. "Jest figured the bill of sale would make it easier."

Lew's mind was racing on to other matters. That story Lige had said he would tell in Sunbrite. There was something too pat about it. Tapper was not a man of much imagination, and he had the yarn too glibly on the tip of his tongue to have made it up out of the whole cloth.

Shucks, it wasn't a story at all. Except for the reason why Lew had fled from the sheriff, Lige had simply transposed things, making Lew the two-time drygulcher instead of himself. Even Handy's attempt to blackmail Tapper dovetailed.

Lew was positive he knew at last who had killed Sam Husted. "A fine time to find out," he told himself gloomily. He turned back to his captor. "That's a good yarn," he said, "about me killin' Husted and Handy. It was just the other way around, wasn't it? Yuh bushwhacked them both."

A dangerous cloud of hate crossed Tapper's face. His lips twitched. For a moment Lew thought the man was going to squeeze the trigger and blast him then and there.

"Smart, ain't yuh?" Lige grated. "Smarter than I figured yuh was."

With relief Lew watched Lige's trigger finger ease its lethal pressure. His shot in the dark had struck home, but it had been a tight squeak for Enders. His mind still searching for that one opportunity, that one desperate chance at life and liberty, Lew realized he would have to be more careful in the future. Tapper was a maniac with a gun. When the mood struck, Lige would kill him without a thought.

THE faithful paint was waiting at the spring. Tapper's horse stood groundhitched back on the trail at the foot of the mesa. "I'm goin' to rope yuh to yore saddle," Lige informed Lew. "Yuh can ride in—a ways."

"Thanks." Lew wracked his brain, trying desperately to devise some scheme of possible escape.

"Lige," he said finally, "suppose I sell

yuh the Bar X. Mebbe right now I'd trade it for a chance to high-tail out of this danged country."

Tapper grinned. "Too late Enders. Yuh know too much."

Lew expected that answer. He made a few more pleas. Tapper turned a deaf ear to them.

"Okay," said Lew. "No use bein' a dog in the manger, I reckon. Write out a bill of sale and I'll sign it."

"Yuh mean that?" Greed and avarice flamed in Tapper's eyes. He fished a tally book and pencil stub out of his pocket with his left hand.

"Bend over," he said, tearing a page out of the tally book. "I'll use yore back for a writin' desk."

Lew stooped over, afraid Tapper would hear his heart thump. How, he wondered, was Lige going to write and hold a gun on him at the same time? That was something he hoped Tapper had forgotten in his eagerness to own the Bar X.

Behind him Lew could visualize Lige shifting the gun from right to left hand.

[*Turn page*]

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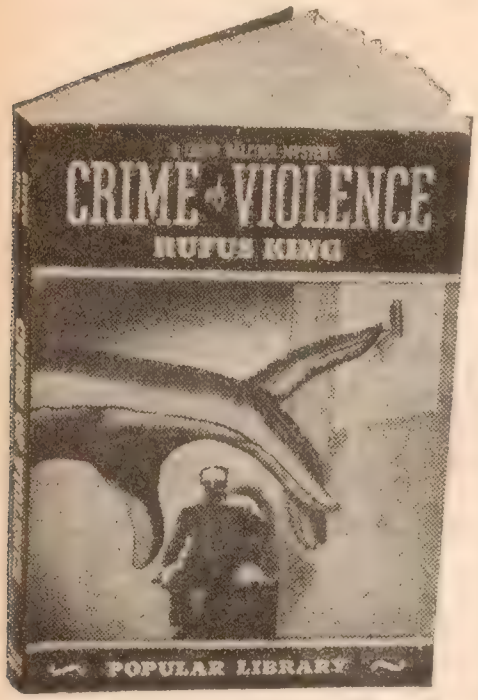

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He could feel the gun lying awkwardly along the small of his back.

"Stand still," snapped Lige.

He got no further. Exerting all his strength Lew straightened up with a jerk, bent back and over, falling to the ground and carrying Tapper with him.

The gun thudded in the dirt, and Lew kicked it way. Then Lew scrambled to his feet and whirled. Lige, moving with amazing agility, was already standing, tugging fiercely at Lew's .45, but the hammer caught in the folds of his clothes.

Lew rushed in, one heavy fist aiming for Tapper's jaw. For a split second, terror flashed horribly in the drygulcher's burning eyes. He gave up trying to tear the gun loose and his hand slapped back behind his shoulder. It came darting forward again, an ugly, ebony-handled sheath knife flashing in its grip.

Tapper lunged striking with the knife. Lew dodged, watching both knife and gun. Throwing up his arm Lew knocked aside the furious slash of the blade. The deflected knife sliced across Lew's arm, cutting into the flesh.

As Lige raised the knife for another blow, Lew grabbed the wrist that held it, driving it upward again as hard as he could. Lew's other hand slapped at the gun Lige had almost cleared, and he jerked the barrel away from his own body as Lige pulled the trigger.

The gun blast was deafening. Powder burns stung Lew's hand, but the lead churned harmlessly into the dirt. A savage twist caught Lige's finger in the trigger-guard, and Lew heard the bone snap. As his hand loosed its hold on the gun, Lew fumbled for it but missed.

Lew let the gun fall to the ground. The strain on his other hand was telling. His grip on Lige's knife wrist was weakening and the deadly blade was slowly being forced into his throat. He could feel the point of the knife and smell Lige's fetid breath as the killer sought to sink the blade.

Lew's free hand arched in a chopping uppercut that rocked Lige backward. But the knife wielder came in again for the kill, striving to wrest his knife-wrist free as he slashed at Lew's face. Lew still hung onto the wrist with one hand, then he moved in suddenly, clamping his other hand around it.

Instead of pushing back, he jerked the wrist forward as hard as he could, almost pulling Lige over on his face. Then he swung the knife out to one side and twisted. Corded muscles on Lige's arm tried to check the savage strain.

[*Turn page*]

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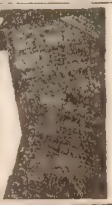

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Lige brought up his free hand in a wild blow that rattled Lew's teeth.

Lew took that blow and another. But his strong hands kept twisting, tearing the ligaments in the wrist that still held Lige's knife. Lige cursed with rage, and pain. He was forced to drop the knife.

Both men were panting from the effort of their struggle. Lew's own eyes were hard with the glint of battle as he released the wrist. "We're on even terms now, hombre," he gritted, taking a step back. The next instant he came forward again, slugging. One-two, left-right, he threw his mallet fists with bewildering speed and force at the heavier man.

The blows drove Lige back. Blood spurted from his smashed nose, and his lips took on the hue and texture of raw meat that had been shredded with a canthook. Lige tried to duck the terrible onslaught. He wiped a hand across his face and it came back dripping blood. Only the fury of his frustration kept him fighting, sending back wild haymakers whenever he could.

One of the blows struck Lew high on the forehead. For a moment Lew

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thought his skull was cracked. He staggered back, blocking a second vicious swing with his arm. When the dancing buzzsaws cleared in his head he waded in again, smashing those deadly lefts and rights to Lige's pulp-battered face.

LIGE gave ground. He weaved groggily, taking terrible punishment. But it seemed to Lew, his own arms tiring, that the big fellow would never fall. Lew didn't know what held him up. He drew his right back for a roundhouse swing. It was now or never. Lew knew he couldn't last much longer himself.

Even before he was hit, Lige Tapper's eyes began to glaze. His head wobbled dizzily. He stumbled and turned half around. Lew reached for him with his left hand, straightened him out, steadied him. And then he let go his right with all he had behind it.

Lige buckled at the knees and crashed to the sand like a dynamited brick chimney. In the fall his head struck hard against a projecting rock. He lay so still Lew thought he was dead.

There was no pity in Lew for the battered dryglucher. He simply wanted Lige alive because the man's testimony was the only thing that could clear him of the killing of Sam Husted.

Lew wiped the blood from his face, as

[*Turn page*]

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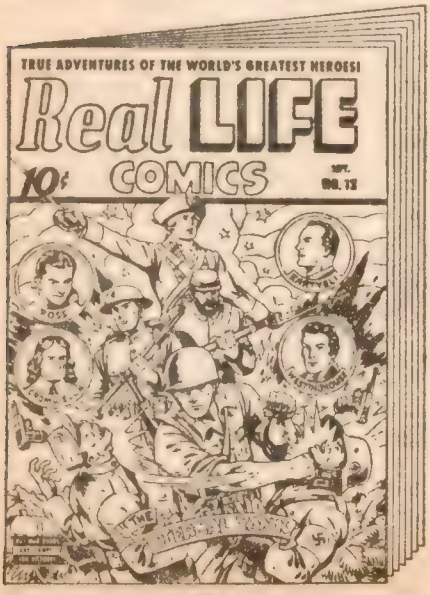

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he staggered over towards the spring. There was a steady drumming in his ears that seemed to grow louder. Cold water might clear his head. Then he had to bandage his arm where Lige's knife had sliced it. After that he'd see about Lige.

The water felt good. But it didn't stop the drumming. It seemed to be getting louder, like hoofbeats. It was hoofbeats.

"Stay where yuh are. I got yuh covered."

That was Matt Higby's shrill voice. Lew recognized it when the hoofbeats stopped. He froze. This time he had no energy left to fight or run. Anyhow, he knew he would have to face the music sometime. And the present, thought Lew, was as good a time as any.

He turned around slowly. Matt Higby, his handlebar mustache bristling, sat astride a lanky roan horse three sizes too big for him. To Lew's surprise the gun the sheriff held was leveled at Lige Tapper.

"He'll stay," said Lew. "He's dead.

The sheriff stared at Lew. "Great glory! What happened to yuh, Enders?" he snapped. "Yuh look like yuh tangled with a wildcat and come out second best."

"Unh-unh, I won," declared Lew.

"Well, put them arms down."

"I ain't under arrest?" Somehow Lew didn't feel half as tired as he had a moment ago.

"Not unless yuh insist. Pick up them guns, then see if yuh can boot some life into Tapper. I heard him grunt."

Lew couldn't understand it. How did Matt know? The sheriff helped him out.

"Sleuthin's as much what comes in as what yuh go out and get," he explained. "'Fore Handy left town early yesterday mornin' he come into my office and left a sealed envelope for me to put in the safe.

"'Don't open it,' he says, 'unless somethin' happens to me.' He seemed nervous. Along about night some jasper—mebbe his name was Enders—slips a note under my door sayin' Handy's been drygulched. So I get Handy's envelope out of the safe and open it. It's a deposition he seen Tapper bushwhack Husted and states if he gets the same dose, the chances are Tapper done it."

The sheriff grinned. "I come out to

pick up Tapper's trail and there he is, on ice but kinda' messy."

"Well, I'll be . . ."

"Yeah," said Higby, "yuh was just bait for that bushwhacker. He was usin' yuh to keep the law off his trail for killin' Husted. Tapper's wanted bad in half a dozen states. He was even lyin' about the Consolidated being behind him buyin' them ranches. That was his own idea, and the big outfit had nothin' to do with it. They'll take all the feeder stock you boys can send 'em. Rance, the superintendent of the hull shebang, told me so himself tonight in the Longhorn Saloon."

The hulk that was Lige Tapper stirred uneasily.

"Yuh gotta help me get him back to Sunbrite." The sheriff jerked a thumb at Tapper. "Do like I said. Kick a little life into him, and put some pepper in it."

"I sure will, Matt."

Lew said it fervently. He meant it.

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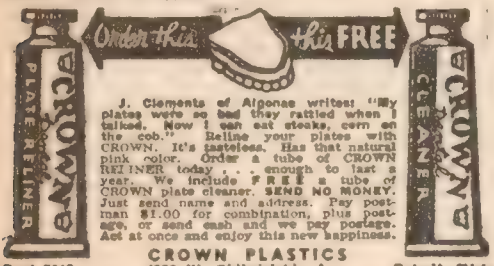

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(Continued from page 13)

keep more or less indefinitely et. Strictly speakin' it ain't genuine jerky, but it is usually called such and passes for jerky these days in many a trapper's and hunter's camp.

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In lookin' ahead these days, you gotta look back to some of the old arts of the pioneer. An' you gotta practise 'em too, if you wanta go all-out fer Victory. Be meetin' you again next issue, friends. Meantime, *hasta la vista.*

—CAPTAIN RANGER.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

CAPTAIN RANGER always has some mighty interesting things to tell you about the cattle country. The old West was really glamorous and filled with stories of brave men and of women who possessed the courage to face the dangers and the loneliness of the new wild land.

Naturally all of you readers of EXCITING WESTERN are eager to know what is in store for you in the next issue of the magazine. We're proud to announce that we have three fine Western novelets by top Western writers all picked out and ready for your enjoyment.

The first of these is SPURS FROM BOOT HILL, by Walker A. Tompkins, and in this, Bob North, the youngest cowpoke on the Ladder 8 payroll, finds himself in a mess of trouble and nearly gets lynched trying to do a friendly deed.

North was saddling up his buckskin horse and getting ready to ride into town for the mail when he and the rest of the outfit heard a shot coming from the direction of Sombrero Hill. They caught sight of a man up on the ridge—but decided that he wasn't firing at them.

All the same Bob North decided that he would ride up there and investigate the shoot-

ing on his way to get the mail. Up on the hill North found Bert Fisk, the grizzled old owner of the FS outfit.

Fisk was feeling bad. He had just shot and killed a horse that was too old and crippled to be of any more use—and was suffering. But that horse had belonged to Fisk's son Jimmy who had disappeared ten years ago. The old rancher was still hoping that his son would return to Wyoming some day.

While North and the old man were standing there talking a drygulcher's rifle roared—the bullet killing Bert Fisk. North managed to keep from being shot and the drygulcher got away.

When Bob North started digging in the spot where Fisk had planned to bury the horse the waddy found a grave. It was quite a shock to North to find that the body buried there was that of Fisk's missing son, Jimmy.

As soon as he found the body North fired three shots as a signal for help, hoping that his boss, Brill Reegan, and the rest of the Ladder 8 outfit would come and help him get the drygulcher.

But it was "High-Hoss" Harrigan, foreman of the FS and a blacksmith "Tongs" Loftus who appeared. The two Ladder 8 men didn't believe Bob North's story of what had happened to their boss. They claimed that North had done the killing.

"But why would I kill Bert Fisk?" North asked. "Him and me was the best of friends."

"The reason you killed him," said Harrigan, "was because you knew Bert Fisk had willed yuh the FS ranch!"

The news was a surprise to North, for he knew nothing about Fisk having willed him the ranch up to then. The FS outfit didn't believe the waddy from the Ladder 8—and were going to lynch Bob North right then. They would have done it if North's own outfit

[*Turn page*]

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hadn't shown up and made the other men change their minds.

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Alamo Paige also appears in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN in a swift moving pony express novelet—RAIDERS OF THE WILDERNESS, by Reeve Walker.

As he approaches Injun Tom Hillary's trading post and relay station on the Kimball-Cheyenne trail Alamo Paige senses danger. When he finds Hillary and a trapper lying dead on the ground in front of the station the Pony Express rider knows that he has been right in his premonitions.

Paige finds that the two men have apparently been killed by raiding Indians—but when he discovers that Hillary and the trapper have been shot and arrows stuck into their wounds he knows that white men are guilty.

Before Alamo Paige has a chance to fight he finds himself surrounded by a hard-bitten crew of outlaws whose leader is a big man named Rocky Kanzler. The Pony Express messenger is captured—but when he learns of the plot Kanzler and his men have cooked up to aid the Kiowas Indians in capturing Fort Nevins, Alamo Paige realizes he has to act fast.

He goes into action when he gets the chance—and even though he risks his life more than once—he once again proves tough as he brings things to a fighting finish. RAIDERS OF THE WILDERNESS is a novelet in which Alamo Paige is at his courageous best.

THE BLACKLEG HERD, by C. William Harrison, is the third novelet in the next issue and it is packed with drama and suspense.

Tom Surrett, young ranch owner, felt that when it was discovered that his cattle were infected with blackleg it was the last straw. First had come the rock slide that had buried his only good water hole—next the fire that had swept across his summer range, and now the dread scourge of his cattle.

Sam Breathitt had promised Surrett a loan on his cattle to help the young rancher through the difficulties that now beset Tom but the discovery of the blackleg changed things considerably.

Even though Breathitt knew that Tom Surrett loved his daughter the banker was a hard man—and he wanted Esta to marry Caleb Landfall, who also owned a nearby ranch.

Breathitt and Surrett quarreled—and when the banker struck the younger man it became a battle of fists between two strong men. It was Surrett who won—but he felt he had lost more than he had gained by doing so.

Esta loved Tom Surrett and wanted him to marry her—but he refused to do so until he had more to offer the girl.

It was only after Surrett had seen his herd stampeded and he himself turned the cattle so they went plunging over a cliff that he found the answer to his problems. It was an answer that called for flaming six-guns against his foes—but Surrett was willing to face the odds against him.

THE BLACKLEG HERD is an extremely dramatic novelet and possesses plenty of power and punch, so we feel that all of you

readers will enjoy it.

There will also be a number of shorter Western stories, all breathing the excitement and danger of the rangeland, and Captain Ranger will be on hand with more interesting Western lore, all making the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN one to remember.

Now let's take a look at some of the mail we have been receiving every issue. Here is a mighty interesting letter from a nurse:

As a nurse in one of the largest training schools here, I come across a great many magazines and books in our library which is for the purpose of keeping our patients' mind occupied during their boring confinement to bed. Usually when a patient asks me to read him a story I don't select a Western but somehow I got hold of the Winter issue of EXCITING WESTERN and read one of my patients the story, "Star on the Desert," by Hascal Giles.

The old fellow immediately took a liking to the story's hero, Banner Blue, and made me search every magazine in the building for another story by the same writer. As he described it, Banner Blue breathes the true character of the old West and the men who made it, rollicking, hard-riding men with a laugh on their lips and death in their guns.

The next day when I went on the wards, many more of the inmates had heard of the story and I had to read Banner Blue's adventures over and over again. So for the sake of keeping your magazine popular with us, and bringing entertainment to those who need it most, bring Banner Blue back in an early issue, will you?—*Ruth Miller, Washington, D. C.*

Thanks for your mighty interesting letter, Miss Miller. We hope to have more Hascal Giles yarns in the magazine—but we hope that you and your patients will find various other stories by other authors in EXCITING WESTERN equally entertaining, stories with heroes who also breathe the spirit of the old West.

Judging from two short letters received our friend Alamo Paige appears to be the subject of different opinions:

EXCITING WESTERN is swell. Keep up the good work. And I sure go for those Pony Express yarns about Alamo Paige. First thing I read in every issue. Here's luck to the magazine.—*Jack Carson, Denver, Col.*

And luck to you, Jack. Glad you like EXCITING WESTERN so well.

I make a motion that your magazine would be improved if you would put Alamo Paige in the Army for about ten years, as I for one skip all stories about him. Give Reeve Walker a long vacation.—*A. W. Bell, Northampton, Mass.*

We gather you don't care much for Alamo Paige, but you forgot to tell us what you do like about the magazine, A. W. Thanks for writing us anyway—and as you see, there are others who do not agree with you about the Pony Express rider.

Let's hear from more of our readers. We aim to please and want to know your likes and dislikes regarding the stories in the magazine. Address all communications to The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. See you all here next time.

—THE EDITOR.

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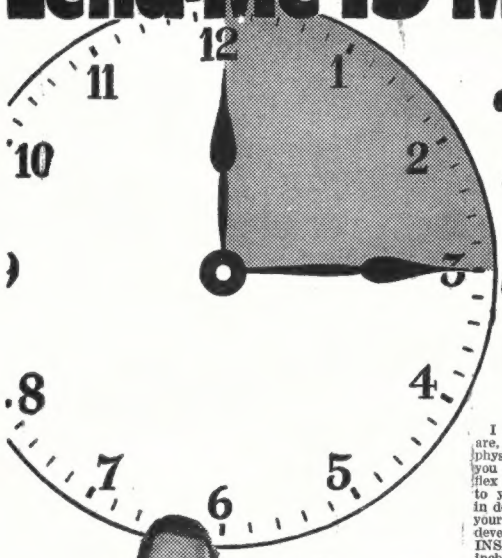

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